**Addressing the  
“Null Curriculum”:  
Teaching about Genocides Other than the Holocaust**

 Samuel Totten

Over the course of the past few decades, there has been a flurry of pedagogical activity at the secondary and university levels in regard to teaching about the Holocaust.1 Such attention to the Holocaust is significant and useful; however, it is disconcerting that inclusion of “other genocides”2 in university and public school curricula is infinitesimal in comparison to the attention given to the Holocaust by educators here and abroad. “Other genocides” include the Armenian genocide (1915-1919), the Soviet manmade famine in the Ukraine (1932-1933), the Bangladesh genocide (1971), the Cambodian genocide (1975-1979), the Bosnian genocide (early to mid-1990s), the Rwanda genocide (1994), and the genocide in Kosovo (late 1990s).3

A bevy of reasons have been offered as to why teaching about the Holocaust is so widespread in schools across the United States and in many other countries. Although not all of those who have posited reasons are in agreement, there are some common explanations that most share: “The Holocaust was a watershed event, not only in the twentieth century, but in the entire history of humanity”;4 it was a major genocide perpetrated by an educated populace in a Western nation, and thus of unique concern to citizens of Western democracies; it is a historical event that receives regular coverage in the media (print press, television and radio news, special television programs, documentaries, and major films); it is an event in which the general population seems to have an avid interest; it is one of the most—if not the most—well-documented events in history, providing an abundance of resources for teaching; survivors of the Holocaust are still alive to speak to students; and information about the Holocaust is included in school textbooks, even if scantily, whereas information about “other genocides” is, for the most part, not. Finally, Novick has persuasively argued that there is a strong, active, and vocal constituency that advocates for the teaching of this history in our nation’s schools.5

**The “Null Curriculum” and Its Ramifications**

The minimal attention to—indeed, for the most part, the exclusion of—other genocides and issues of intervention and prevention of genocide from school curricula fits into what Stanford professor Elliot Eisner refers to as the “null curriculum.” More specifically, his thesis is that

what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a void, it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider; the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives with which one can view a situation or problem.6

Ignoring “other genocides,” either by excluding them from the curriculum or by simply mentioning them in passing, sends an implicit message that such historical events and their victims are not as important as the Holocaust. Ignoring the issues of intervention and prevention of genocide may suggest that they are not all that important; that young people have little or no interest in them; that they are too complex to tackle; and, even, that little can be done to staunch genocide, so why focus on means of prevention?

Even a brief examination of Eisner’s points about the “null curriculum” provides ample food for thought in teaching about genocide.

* On a basic level, it is obvious that if students do not learn about other genocides, they may assume that the Holocaust was simply an aberration of history.
* Students are unlikely to appreciate that genocide is not simply a curse of the past, but one that haunts contemporary society.
* Students will be unlikely to gain knowledge about the preconditions that are common to various genocides.7
* Students will be unlikely to gain critical insights into the primacy of internal affairs, state sovereignty, and realpolitik, and how these play into the hands of perpetrators of genocide.
* Students will be deprived of even considering a “comparative approach”—not in regard to a comparison of pain, which is pointless and unconscionable, but in regard to the “whys,” “hows,” and “whats” behind different genocidal events.
* Students may not become conversant with current efforts to detect and prevent genocide or the barriers that mitigate against intervention and prevention.
* Students will not come to understand the role that the international community has played in regard to “allowing” genocide to take place (e.g., in Rwanda) or, conversely, how it has staunched incipient actions possibly slouching toward genocide (e.g., in East Timor).
* Students may not learn that various human rights organizations, whose membership comprises “ordinary” citizens, work to ameliorate human rights violations that are liable to explode into genocide.
* Students are not likely to appreciate that genocide is not inevitable, but that what impedes the intervention and prevention of genocide is largely the will of the international community.

**Overcoming Barriers in Teaching about Genocide**

When examined objectively, most of the barriers to, or reasons given for, not teaching about “other genocides” or means of prevention either do not make complete sense or are fairly easy to overcome—especially when there is a will do so. A succinct discussion of some of the most commonly stated reasons for not teaching about other genocides follows.

Most “other genocides” do not have a critical mass (as the Holocaust does) that advocates for the inclusion of such information in the classroom.

For the most part, unfortunately, this statement is true. With the exception of a small but highly articulate Armenian community in the United States that has long tried to draw attention to the Ottoman Turkish genocide of the Armenians during World War I, and the efforts of an active group of Ukrainian Canadians to draw attention to the Soviet manmade famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s, most of the victims of “other genocides” perpetrated in the twentieth century have, at best, a minuscule contingent speaking on their behalf.8

Yet the lack of an advocacy group should not assign the history of any genocide to the equivalent of educational oblivion. This is where both scholars and concerned educators need to make a concerted effort to develop curricula on various genocides and to call for the inclusion of such subject matter in school textbooks. Furthermore, they need to apply pressure on museums whose focus is a particular genocide (the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, etc.) to address the larger issue of genocide and to develop programs and exhibits, even if temporary, that educate about “other genocides.”

Educators also need to encourage and cajole their professional organizations (e.g., National Council for the Social Studies, the American Historical Association, the American Sociological Association) to address other genocides in their official journals and to encourage the inclusion of such topics/issues at their annual conferences. Finally, *teachers need to reflect on what not teaching about “other genocides” and/or issues of intervention and prevention means* and to become proactive by developing lessons and units on their own that address such issues.

Many teachers did not study about the “other genocides” in school (although that is probably true of the Holocaust as well), and thus may not be conversant with them.

This, too, is a fact, but it need not and should not impede the teaching of “other genocides.” Every single day, instructors in high schools and colleges teach about topics and issues they did not study as undergraduate or graduate students. This is due to many different reasons: the curriculum demands that a particular topic be taught; an issue is included in the text and the instructor feels compelled to teach the material; or the teacher thinks a particular topic or issue should be brought into the curriculum because students are interested or the material is pertinent or timely.

Again, there are ample resources (including a small number of curricula) and resource centers available to assist teachers in developing lessons and units of study on other genocides. An increasing number of websites whose focus is genocide and genocide education could prove helpful in designing such lessons and units.

Most “other genocides” are not addressed in textbooks (and when they are, the coverage is perfunctory).

This is a major concern because the textbook often constitutes the curriculum in schools. *Such a situation makes it that much more imperative that curriculum developers who are working on state guidelines, teachers guides, and/or curricula on human rights and genocide prepare documents that include in-depth and accurate information on issues germane to “other genocides” and the intervention and prevention of genocide*. Currently, at least three states—New York, Connecticut, California—have done so.

Teachers need to know that there are now many resources and ample information available on various genocides, including books of case studies and works that include both case studies and eyewitness testimonies.9 Over and above these are numerous other books, essays, first-person accounts, and documentaries available on the theory of genocide, various genocidal acts, and issues of intervention and prevention. Much of this material is easy to gain access to, fairly easy to comprehend, and developmentally appropriate for upper-level high school students and undergraduate students.

**“Other genocides” are not perceived to be as important a catastrophe as the Holocaust.**

There seems to be a mindset among many teachers and professors in the United States—and possibly in much of the Western World—that “other genocides” are not as significant or as catastrophic as the Holocaust, and there is neither an educational nor a moral imperative to teach about them. This no doubt stems from the previously mentioned fact that the Holocaust was perpetrated by a highly cultured Western nation against fellow citizens and other Europeans.

To a certain extent, such a frame of mind is understandable, but it is also extremely parochial and not a little insensitive to the tragic dimensions of so many other genocides that have been perpetrated in recent memory across the globe. Indeed, if educators are truly concerned about contemporary human rights violations (including genocide) and want their students to understand that genocide is something that has plagued humanity for centuries right up to today, then they would want to teach them about various genocidal acts.

“Other genocides” are not as well known as the Holocaust because they have not been the focus of the same kind of media attention (e.g., newspaper and magazine articles, television specials, television miniseries, documentaries, feature films).

True—and this makes it all the more incumbent upon teachers to educate themselves as well as their students about critical issues that need to be taught and not to rely on the mass media to educate them about such events and issues. Fortunately, a number of outstanding documentaries and major motion pictures on “other” genocidal acts are readily available. This is particularly true of the Armenian genocide10 and the Cambodian genocide (e.g., *The Killing Fields*).

The Holocaust, but not “other genocides,” is a taken-for-granted part of the curriculum when it comes to the subject of genocide.

While acknowledging the fact that the teaching of the Holocaust is still far from a given in many schools in the United States, when anything related to genocide *is* addressed in the schools, it more often than not concerns the Holocaust. Indeed, when the term genocide or the phrase “genocide in the twentieth century” is even mentioned in educational circles, many educators automatically assume that one is talking about the Holocaust. *Far too many people, including educators, are sorely limited in their knowledge about genocide and don’t stretch beyond the obvious or the taken-for-granted. This needs to change*.

Teachers may feel that, given time constraints and an over-packed curriculum, they have time to address only a single genocidal event.

Even with an overpacked curriculum, including a focus on at least one genocide other than the Holocaust is feasible. Certainly, one way is to teach the Holocaust during one semester and a different genocide during another. If a curriculum does not allow for the teaching about a second genocide during regular school hours, then the instructor could assign the study of one or more genocidal acts as extension or independent research projects. Different genocides could also be taught in alternate years. The teacher, of course, should develop a solid set of guidelines and a rubric for such a study, allocate time for consultation with the students, and make sure that ample resources are available during the study. While such an approach may be rather “bare-boned,” at least it informs students of other genocidal acts.

Students are interested in the Holocaust (and possibly not even aware of other genocides), and thus educators sense that lessons on the Holocaust will garner student attention.

It is true that many students are extremely interested in the Holocaust, often more so than other subjects. What is not known, and that’s because few educators have attempted to teach about such subject matter, is whether the students would be as interested in other genocides and/or issues germane to the intervention and prevention of genocide. There is, of course, a key way of finding out—teach them about the other genocides.

Distastefully put, “other genocides” are not as popular a topic as the Holocaust appears to be with both the general public and educators.

This may be the crux of the problem in regard to why “other genocides” are a “null curriculum.” Like so much in contemporary life, what makes it into the school curriculum is based, in part, on that which is “popular” or has been popularized. Among the many reasons the Holocaust is so popular to teach in schools are a strong constituency of advocates of its inclusion in the curriculum, a focus on the topic by entertainment media (e.g., *Schindler’s List*), and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Educators must ask themselves whether their curriculum should be dictated solely by that which is currently popular in the larger culture. Indeed, they need to ask themselves whether there are not ample reasons to teach about other genocides. This is especially true in light of how the United States has influenced or has been influenced by genocide in this century, for example, in creating, although inadvertently, the conditions for the genocide perpetrated in Cambodia, playing the bystander during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, or attempting to intervene and prevent genocide in Kosovo.

Educators may believe there is a dearth of resources available to teach about “other genocides.”

If this is true, it constitutes a gross misconception. As noted earlier, there is an abundance of resources available—-more now than ever—on all aspects of genocide, including the many genocides perpetrated throughout the twentieth century. The three volume set titled *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographical Review*, edited by Israel Charny, is one of the most useful resources in locating such materials.11 Each volume includes annotated bibliographies on a wide array of topics germane to genocide (e.g., definitional issues, the history of genocide, specific genocides committed in the twentieth century, law-related issues, first-person accounts of genocide, major literary works, the issue of humanitarian intervention in genocidal situations, and educating about genocide).

Unlike the case with the Holocaust, a minuscule number of scholars have assisted in the development of pedagogical materials to assist public school teachers to teach about “other genocides.”

With a couple of notable exceptions, few genocide scholars have seen the value of, or taken the time to assist, public school personnel in developing curricula and other pedagogical sources for teaching about different genocidal acts. This could be easily remedied by educators requesting that their national organizations (e.g., National Council for the Social Studies or the National Council of Teachers of English) invite and involve noted scholars to assist in the development of such materials. The involvement of such scholars is crucial because they are capable of assisting in the development of historically accurate materials and in vetting materials developed by others.

With regard to genocide intervention or prevention, many secondary teachers lack knowledge of these issues and think that students are not interested in them.

This is a major problem that needs to be addressed by curriculum developers. There is a growing body of theory and research on the issues of intervention and prevention, including case studies regarding such attempts, and it is incumbent upon those designing curricula to familiarize themselves with such information and to incorporate it into their products. Educators and others who publish articles and books on teaching about genocide also need to begin to address such issues, as that may be the only way other educators are introduced to such concerns.

Student interests and abilities are often underestimated by both educators and parents. If students truly come to care about issues germane to genocide, it seems natural that at least some would begin to ask about how genocide can be prevented. This would, of course, be the perfect entry point for an examination of issues related to intervention and prevention. If nothing else, even a simple introduction of such issues would be valuable because it could plant the seeds for concern about such issues.

**A Place to Begin**

Those who currently teach about the Holocaust could begin by asking themselves, “Why am I teaching about the Holocaust?” If the answer is because this history is deemed essential for students to understand as a watershed event, then it is important to continue to teach about it. However, if a teacher’s rationale is also to raise students’ consciousness about the need to speak up whenever and wherever human rights are denied, then it is imperative to consider whether teaching about genocide solely through the study of the Holocaust is the best way to meet pedagogical objectives.

Ultimately, a teacher may decide that, rather than teaching about a genocidal act that was perpetrated fifty years ago, it might be more valuable to teach about a recent act of genocide. Then again, a teacher might decide that there is a strong rationale for teaching about a genocide that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g., the Armenian genocide) or during the middle of the twentieth century (e.g., the Holocaust), *but that it is equally important* to engage students in an in-depth study of a contemporary example of genocide and the measures taken, or not taken, with regard to it.

Second, those who care about genocide need to familiarize themselves with key issues. This should be a given, but often it is not.12 Some teachers have a propensity for focusing on the “whats,” “whens,” and “hows” of a genocide (all important), but ignoring the ultimate question of “why.” As a result, students walk away from such a study bereft of an understanding of the historical trends that ultimately culminated in the genocide. To be able to teach something well and in-depth, one must be conversant with the key issues that impinge on the history.

Third, secondary level educators would do well to examine and glean ideas from various curricula currently available on genocide, though realizing that none of them is as yet as strong as it could or should be. Among those most worthy of examination are New York State’s three volume *The Human Right Series: Teaching About the Holocaust and Genocide* and California’s *Model Curriculum for Human Rights and Genocide.*13Ideally, teachers will borrow the best ideas and concepts and will avoid any inaccurate information.

Fourth, educators need to develop their own lessons and units (or extension projects) on “other genocides” and issues of intervention and prevention. This initial step is an important one, for it automatically negates the “null curriculum” by moving such subject matter into the explicit curriculum.

Fifth, if possible, teachers need to build personal libraries on such issues and/or encourage school librarians and resource center directors to purchase key works that address different aspects of genocide. Even the purchase of one book a semester by the school library is a worthwhile goal. Only in this way will students have adequate materials and information with which to conduct their studies and research.

Sixth, educators need to team up with scholars who specialize in genocide studies to develop curricula. This is just about the only way to ensure that the information in the curricula is historically accurate. Only specialists in the field are likely to care deeply enough to make sure that all aspects of the curricula are historically accurate and pedagogically sound. Furthermore, it is not enough to involve the scholars as consultants or vetters at the end of the process, for in the past, some have played such roles and have been extremely disappointed in the final products.

Seventh, to gain support for their pedagogical efforts, educators at both the secondary and university levels need to seek the involvement of their professional organizations in issues of genocide. Some ways in which this can be accomplished are by the passage of resolutions at annual meetings, the publication of articles or special theme issues in the organization’s journals, and the inclusion of sessions on such issues at state, regional, and national conferences. Interested individuals could establish a special interest group whose focus is on “other genocides” and/or issues of intervention and prevention of genocide.

Eighth, educators and scholars need to apply pressure on state departments of education, especially those that already have curricula on the Holocaust in place, to develop curricula on “other genocides” and issues of intervention and prevention.

And last, educators who attend conferences on the Holocaust and/or human rights education should work to convince the sponsors of such conferences to include sessions on “other genocides” and issues of intervention and prevention.

Teaching about “other genocides” and the issues of intervention and prevention is an idea whose time came long ago. Now is the time to act. To neglect to do so is not only nonsensical, it is educationally and morally irresponsible. Ironically, this is even more true of those who claim that they care about the fate of others, who find genocide reprehensible, and who have taught about the Holocaust in the belief that their students need to understand what it means to be a bystander when others are being harmed.

**Notes**

1. There is ample evidence of this: the development of mandated or recommended curricula by various state departments of education; scores of Holocaust-related conferences held every year across the nation; numerous international conferences on Holocaust education held in various nations (e.g., England, Israel, Sweden, and the United States) at which hundreds of educators from scores of nations are in attendance; the ever-increasing publication of books, book chapters, and articles on Holocaust education; special programs on Holocaust pedagogy at various museums across the nation; and the publication of new journals whose exclusive focus is Holocaust education (e.g., *The British Journal of Holocaust Education*, which has been renamed *The Journal of Holocaust Education*).

2. It is telling that most genocides other than the Holocaust are often clumped together and referred to generically as “other genocides.”

3. While much more attention is given to “other genocides” at the college and university levels than at the public school level, it is still scant in comparison to that given to the Holocaust. There are two main publications on the teaching of genocide at the college and university level: Joyce Freedman-Apsel and Helen Fein, eds., *Teaching about Genocide: A Guidebook for College and University Teachers—Critical Essays, Syllabi, and Assignments* (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association, 1991); and Jack Porter and Steve Hoffman, *The Sociology of Holocaust and Genocide: A Teaching and Learning Guide* (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association, 1999). Together, they list only twenty courses as dealing with “other genocides.” More specifically, of the fourteen course syllabi included in the Freedman-Apsel and Fein book, thirteen deal exclusively with genocide theory or “other genocides.” As for the Porter and Hoffman text, only seven out of the seventeen syllabi deal exclusively with genocide theory or “other genocides.”

4. William S. Parsons and Samuel Totten, *Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1993).

5. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).

6. Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

7 Genocide scholars have delineated (1) certain conditions under which genocide is more frequent, for example, genocide against indigenous peoples; genocide following decolonization of a two-tier structure of domination; genocide in the process of struggles for power by ethnic, racial, or religious groups, or struggles for greater autonomy; genocide against hostage or scapegoat groups (see Leo Kuper, cited in Israel W. Charny, *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographical Review,* Vol. 1 [New York: Facts on File, 1988, p. 4]); (2) certain predictors, none of which by itself results in genocide but which combines with a variety of factors, for example, extreme nationalism, extreme racist ideology, a fanatical political ideology, religious fanaticism, retribution, and territorial expansion; and (3) the types of states that are more likely to commit genocide, including dictatorships, military dictatorships, extreme nationalist states, and totalitarian states. Also factored into such a mix are victim groups that are “outside the universe of obligation” of the perpetrator group (see Helen Fein, cited in Charny, *Genocide*, p. 3).

8. For example, massacres in Indonesia in 1995-96, East Timor in 1975, and Bangladesh in 1971.

9. Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990); Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny, *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1997).

10. Samuel Totten, “Films of Other Genocides,” in Israel W. Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, Vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC Clio Press, 1999), 232-234.

11. Israel W. Charny, *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, Vol. I (New York: Facts on File, 1988); *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, Vol. 2 (London: Mansell Publishers, 1991); *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review,* Vol. 3. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

12. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “How They Teach the Holocaust,” in Lucy S. Dawidowicz, ed., *What Is the Use of Jewish History?* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 65-83; Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons, “State Developed Teacher Guides and Curricula on Genocide and/or the Holocaust,” *Inquiry in Social Studies: Curriculum, Research, and Instruction: The Journal of the North Carolina Council for the Social Studies* 28, no. 1 (1992): 27-47; Samuel Totten and Karen Riley, in preparation.

13. New York State Department of Education, *The Human Rights Series: Teaching about the Holocaust and Genocide* (Albany, N.Y.: Author, 1985-1986); California Department of Education, *Model Curriculum for Human Rights and Genocide* (Sacramento, Calif.: Author, 1987).

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