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For This Teacher, Classroom Dialogue on George Floyd Involves Sharing Family-Survival Story

New York City educator seeks to open up virtual-classroom discussion on racism by delving into her Jewish grandfather's Holocaust experience



Urban Assembly School for the Performing Arts in Harlem, N.Y., aims to teach history that represents the backgrounds of all members. A George Floyd tribute wall in Harlem earlier this month.

PHOTO: FRANK FRANKLIN II/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Lee Hawkins](#)

June 18, 2020 7:00 am ET

On the first school day following the [killing of George Floyd](#), New York City high-school speech pathologist Tova Itzkovitz had an uneasy feeling as she logged into her virtual classroom.

About 60% of the students at Urban Assembly School for the Performing Arts in Harlem, where she works, are African-American and 40% are Latino. Ms. Itzkovitz worried that the bond she had built with many of her students could be in jeopardy.

“I didn’t know how I would be received as a white educator,” she said. “Are they going to think that I’m on the side that thought this was OK, because I’m white?”

Ms. Itzkovitz said she found a way to connect to her students about the killing of Mr. Floyd and racism through her own family history and her grandfather, a Holocaust survivor.



Tova Itzkovitz asks her high-school students about their experience of racism.

PHOTO: TOVA ITZKOVITZ

“I’ve been asking them if they’ve experienced racism, where it was, how they felt, and what they did about it,” she said. Sharing some of her story heightened the trust level and stimulated more discussion, she said. “It’s done nothing but bring me closer to my kids.”

Ms. Itzkovitz is one of many white teachers across the U.S. who are grappling with how to support students

of color in the national conversation around Mr. Floyd, a black man who was killed in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25.

Dr. Laurie Nadel, a psychotherapist who specializes in trauma, said weaving personal or family history into the lesson plan “clears away a lot of barriers” that make it harder for teachers to reach students.

“There’s no better teaching model than personal experience, sharing your own background and history with regard to discrimination and prejudice,” she said. “There’s nothing more profound than self-disclosure as a way for building a foundation of common ground and understanding.”

As Ms. Itzkovitz’s class of about 20 students discussed their frustrations, she remembered being around their same age when she tried to process the experience of her grandfather, Ezra Itzkovitz, who was held in Terezin, a concentration camp 30 miles north of Prague, during World War II.

“The only thing he did wrong was being Jewish,” she told her students.



Protesters marched in the Harlem section of New York earlier this month against the killing of George Floyd.

PHOTO: G. RONALD LOPEZ/ZUMA PRESS

Ms. Itzkovitz began to discuss how important it is for young people to learn as much as possible about the adversities that their elders and ancestors faced. The students, including some who had learned about the Holocaust and lynchings in the South, began to ask more questions. They also discussed how the past relates to the present.

Urban Assembly's principal, Meghan McMahon, said she encourages all the school's teachers to develop lessons that support one of the school's critical missions: "Studying and teaching history that represents the backgrounds and cultures of all members."

Ms. McMahon, who is white, said that teaching even the most difficult historical lessons "is our constant work."

Joanne Hernandez, an Urban Assembly senior and student body president, said that as a Hispanic, she appreciates the school's commitment to teaching about historical atrocities such as slavery and the Holocaust.

"I think it's good to know what happened because history repeats," she said.

Janai Henderson, a black 16-year-old junior at Urban Assembly, said Ms. Itzkovitz's contribution to the discussion helped her reflect on traumatic experiences she has had with police officers.



Terezin, Czech Republic, earlier this month.

PHOTO: LIBOR ZAVORAL/ZUMA PRESS

“We connected because of that. I feel like we can have a more open conversation now,” she said.

Today, she said she gets a little nervous around police, but recognizes that “not all officers are the same.”

Ayeley Sowah, a black teacher at the school, has also talked about her life and family experiences with students and colleagues. The topics she has discussed include “raising black children in an America that doesn’t want them.”

“Everything from school to social, emotional awareness, and raising them in a morally and ethical way where we want them to be peaceful, but peace is not brought upon them,” she said.

Ms. Itzkovitz was told very little as a child and teenager about her grandfather’s story, and she was reluctant to ask questions. But she said her exploration of her family’s history has helped her understand how anti-Semitism and racism can affect families across generations.

“My grandfather was very tough, because of what he went through,” she said.

“How do you go back into the world and be sentimental about things that are not life-and-death situations?”

In 2018, Ms. Itzkovitz finally got clearer insight into her grandfather’s life when she visited Terezin.

Mr. Itzkovitz’s physical toughness and the fact that he was a tailor who spoke five languages helped him survive the camp, she said. He was shot in his left leg but



still managed to escape the camp and eventually make it to America, where he went to great lengths to shield his granddaughter from the pain of his story.

Ezra Itzkovitz was held in Terezin, a concentration camp, during World War II.

PHOTO: ITZKOVITZ FAMILY

He toughened Ms. Itzkovitz and her father.

“As a little girl, I didn’t understand that, and I butted heads with him,” she said, “because he had very little tolerance for any crying or any feeling.”

But when she visited Terezin and walked into a small cell in the same vicinity of where Mr. Itzkovitz fought for survival, she finally discovered why.

“It’s hard to imagine hundreds of people crammed into that space,” she said. “But I felt amazed that, so many years later, I was standing where my grandfather stood.”

But she didn’t cry.



Visitors walked through the cemetery of the former Nazi concentration camp in Terezin, Czech Republic, in 2019.

PHOTO: PETR DAVID JOSEK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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