



HOLOCAUST, GENOCIDE & HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The Initiative's Educational Equity Focus

Through its inquiry-based professional development (PD) programs, the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State supports K-12 teachers and students engaging with difficult topics in their classrooms. Based on the latest research in PD for educators, the Initiative's collaborative, yearlong programs engage teachers in enriching their practices by using compelling questions to drive learning. This learning can transform student learning by fostering empathy, critical thinking, agency, and civic-discourse skills surrounding complex social issues. It can also transform schools and communities from within, as applying an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning about difficult topics often reveals local opportunities for designing more equitable systems where all children can learn, grow, and thrive.

The Initiative recognizes that inequality can normalize messages of bias, prejudice and hate, creating conditions in which human rights violations and genocide become possible. Although messages of bias, prejudice and hate are often transmitted in subtle ways, disrupting them requires direct and sustained engagement with difficult topics. As teachers are uniquely positioned to help students develop knowledge, skills, and habits to interrupt bias, investigate underlying structures of inequality, and build more equitable learning communities, the Initiative's programs support teachers in doing this important yet challenging work.

To begin each yearlong program, teachers participate in anti-bias training, study principles of educational equity and trauma-informed practices, engage in critical reflection, and develop authentic questions about their teaching of difficult topics. Supported by small inquiry communities and dedicated team leaders, participants design inquiry-based action plans to address the specific needs of their students, their curricula and standards, and their community contexts. Teachers may choose to focus their action plans on inquiry-based approaches to teaching difficult historical content like the Holocaust or slavery. They may also use inquiry to investigate questions, with their students or about their own practices, in relation to topics such as gender equity, anti-racism, or disability justice. As they implement their action plans throughout the year, teachers attend regular webinars to receive ongoing support from the Initiative's experts in content, pedagogy, and educational equity. They continue to examine their own practices and generate questions for future inquiry.

Teachers who participate in the Initiative's PD programs:

- Deepen their understanding of core concepts in educational equity
- Examine how structural inequality affects teaching and learning in various contexts
- Engage in critical reflection on their experiences as individuals and their roles within communities and school systems
- Create individual action plans to engage their students with compelling questions and inquiry-based learning around difficult topics
- Develop tools and skills to facilitate classroom discussions about difficult topics
- Systematically inquire into their own teaching practices through an equity lens