

“She’s going to ask me 10 million questions”: The impact of school-based Holocaust education across generations¹

Paula Cowan, Reader in Education, University of the West of Scotland
(paula.cowan@uws.ac.uk)

Tara Jones, Associate Lecturer, University of the West of Scotland

Abstract

While there is anecdotal evidence that parents have concerns about their primary children’s learning about the Holocaust, there is no empirical evidence to support this. This research provides insight into this by analysing data from oral feedback from a small group of parents whose children learned about the Holocaust in their last year of primary, in the same school with the same teacher. This paper also explores parent learning of the Holocaust that took place during their children’s study of the Holocaust. Evidence is based on data from interviews with parents. Findings are that parental concerns are evident, and that these can be addressed by effective teacher communication with parents and by the teacher demonstrating that lessons and activities suit curricular requirements and pupils’ needs. Further, findings suggest that children’s learning about the Holocaust in school stimulated discussion in the home. Whilst parents felt they had personally not learned anything new, deeper analysis revealed that home discussions had extended parents’ own understanding in terms of a new and different perspective of the Holocaust. It is concluded that Holocaust education in the primary school can provide opportunities for inter-generational learning and engagement.

Key Words

Holocaust Education, Primary, Interdisciplinary, Parents

Introduction

The United Nations Resolution on Holocaust Remembrance (60/7) has encouraged member states to develop education programmes to address the lessons of the Holocaust (United Nations, 2014). Its broad range of aims and

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objectives include prevention of future genocides, broader public awareness of the Holocaust, reduction of antisemitism and racism and increased support for human rights (United Nations, 2014). Mihr (2015), however, argues, that whilst Holocaust education can be complementary to Human Rights Education there is no clear evidence that Holocaust education alone can reduce the likelihood of future genocides or has any direct effect on reducing prejudice or increasing the capacity for individuals to challenge human rights abuses. Short (2003) also points out that tolerance itself is not necessarily a virtue and the Holocaust is an example of the morally reprehensible side of tolerance in terms of how the Nazi regime was enabled in its attempts to annihilate European Jewry. It is accepted, nevertheless, that whilst it is perceived not possible to eradicate antisemitism and racism altogether, the purpose is to provide a level of inoculation for the wider public against racist ideology and antisemitic propaganda (Short and Reed, 2004:6-7).

In an attempt to offer guidance to primary teachers, Cowan and Maitles (2017:110-114) identify the narratives of Anne Frank, the SS St. Louis, the *Kindertransport*, and the Rescue of the Danish Jews as suitable themes for pupils aged 10-12 years. Further, Cowan and Maitles (ibid) identify the children's non-fictional text *Hana's Suitcase* (Levine, 2003), a text that 'takes' young readers into the Theresienstadt ghetto and camp, as a vehicle for incorporating music into Holocaust education and learning about the musical activities at this camp. This text was used by one of the primary schools in the above Cowan and Maitles longitudinal study (2005, 2007), the findings of which demonstrated a positive improvement in students' values with regard to tolerance, active citizenship and individual responsibility towards racism, after studying the Holocaust.

Adeline Salmon, co-ordinator of educational workshops at the *Shoah Memorial*, Paris, recognises the importance of preparing parents of children aged 9 to 12 years, for their children's visit to the Memorial. Salmon contacts parents who have strong reservations about their child's participation and tries to reassure them by explaining that no violent images will be shown. One of the responsibilities of the class teacher, Salmon reports, is to ensure that parents have clear expectations of this visit (UNESCO, 2011). Many researchers and Holocaust educators are adamant that the horrors of the Holocaust should not be taught to primary students, (e.g. Totten, 1999; Woolley, 2010; Cowan and Maitles, 2017), but the lack of consensus in defining exactly what these 'horrors' are, leads to tension. Simone Schweber (2008:2076) summarises this tension by stating that a suitable 'preparatory version' for young learners can be misleading while the fuller version is "too complex, too appalling, too impenetrable, too emotionally disturbing".

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

life stories are a crucial ingredient in what makes us human and, in turn, what kind of human they make us

(Goodson, 2013, np)

Two strands underpin the theoretical and pedagogical justification for this case study: the use of narrative; and the issue of psychological harm to young learners. The first strand is specifically concerned with personal narrative, as a pedagogical device; in this case, trauma narrative. The issue of psychological harm is particularly pertinent in regard to personal or trauma narrative where the individual is asked to identify with, witness or experience the trauma alongside the subject (cf. Rak, 2003).

People lead storied lives that are intertwined with and shaped by the self and others; they are at the heart of how we make meaning and are central to how we make sense of who we are and how we relate to the world (Bruner, 1996; Gilbert, Hipkins & Cooper, 2005; Gallagher, 2014). Stories provide an important form of education as they can help us reflect, evaluate and re-evaluate ethically and morally (Gallagher, 2014). In their discussion of the use of narrative in science education Gilbert et al (2005) identify several positive ways that narrative has been understood to support learning. This includes providing a background to understanding, helping to start ethical discussions, making topics more relevant and interesting and help to include those who might find topics inaccessible or alien (ibid). They also state that narrative can help develop an individual's capacity for imagination such as being able to imagine worlds that might be very different to the one they inhabit. Therefore, not only do stories play an active role in constructing a person's reality they also play an active role in transforming it. Gallagher (ibid) adds that narratives help to shape understanding of norms and values and can provide an enriched capacity for understanding and social empathy.

However, narratives that focus on trauma and experiences of trauma have the potential to cause psychological harm. Whilst it has been argued some degree of suffering, emotional violence or discomfort is not only necessary but also unavoidable (see for example: Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012; Mintz, 2013; Zembylas, 2015), it is important to ask where the line is drawn (Zembylas, 2015). Zembylas (ibid) notes that a pedagogy of discomfort should allow students to unpack their cherished beliefs and values in a safe place and ethical violence or psychological harm should be minimised. However, whilst ensuring that the classroom is a safe place to discuss sensitive topics, classroom safety does not necessarily ensure that students will not experience stress and discomfort.

It seems to be accepted that for moral transformation to be possible, students need to be engaged emotionally but for emotional engagement to occur at any level, some degree of suffering, emotional violence or discomfort is not only necessary but also unavoidable (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012; Mintz, 2013; Zembylas, 2015). Thus, in regard to teaching the Holocaust, to children or adults, the question should not be whether emotionally disturbing material should be

introduced, but how much and in what context. In this regard, concern about the approach to teaching the Holocaust is as important as the content. Rak (2003), for instance, argues that it is not necessary to take students to the point of 'crisis' with regard to experiencing the trauma of others and that to do this is ethically unacceptable. Although, what might be the point of 'crisis' for one child may well be different to that of another. In this respect it can be perceived as important that teachers know and understand the capacities and capabilities of the children in their classrooms as well as their own particular stories or narratives.

Mintz's discussion (2013) of the paradox of suffering in social justice education contextualises the problem of psychological harm when teaching the Holocaust to French fifth grade children (ages 10-11). Mintz, (ibid) concluded that suffering by the learners was unavoidable but that educators can distinguish between pedagogically valuable suffering from that which is not. Compassionate suffering, that is suffering through a recognition of the pain and suffering of others, is perceived as pedagogically valuable since it provides a bridge between the self and other and can motivate students to act against injustice.

Here it is important to take into account the emotional wellbeing and resilience of students as well as what is necessary for students to be able to learn the important moral and ethical values required. It is widely accepted that children's emotional development matures gradually (cf. Saarni, 2011) and thus children are not, therefore, able to cope with or even process emotionally disturbing material to the same level or in the same way as adults. Thus, what would be acceptable for adults would not be acceptable levels of emotional disturbance for children and, the younger a child is the less emotionally disturbing the content should be. The text *Hana's Suitcase* (Levine, 2003) offers numerous opportunities for learning. These include understanding of the construction of narrative within historical context but also a wider understanding of culture, religion, geography and arts as vehicles through which to experience and make sense of individual narrative. It also provides opportunities for inter-generational learning since the narrative nature of Hana's life story includes her family and community life.

Methodology

In this research the class teacher (CT) chose to integrate the Holocaust into the class (n=32) topic of World War Two; study of the Holocaust was integrated through the children's *Hana's Suitcase* (Levine, 2003). The school is situated in a relatively affluent area in Renfrewshire, Scotland. Because the Holocaust is not mandatory in Scotland's primary and secondary curriculum, school-based Holocaust education in Scotland relies on Head Teachers, and/or Directors of Education who are committed to the Holocaust being taught in their schools, and to teachers, who choose to include Holocaust education in their programme of work.

The CT chose to teach this topic several weeks into the school session to allow time for a safe learning environment to be established. The CT engaged in a long and in-depth discussion with pupils about the classroom environment being one of safety and acceptance, where individuality and difference would be celebrated with pupils, prior to teaching the Holocaust. During this discussion, pupils considered the acceptance of barriers to learning and that each pupil had the right to engage in their personal learning journey. This was supported by the school's use of *BounceBack* (McGrath and Noble, 2003), a social and emotional learning programme, that is used to support teachers to develop pupils' resilience skills. The CT taught the Holocaust through Social Studies, Literacy and English, and Expressive Arts through developing skills and knowledge in Music and Art (Duffy and Cowan, 2018).

The CT wrote a letter to parents at the beginning of the school year informing them of his weekly availability to discuss matters concerning their child. This letter requested parents monitor their child's personal research on the Holocaust, and invited them to contact him with any questions. No parent contacted the CT about this.

The case study findings reported here addresses the following two research questions:

- What are parents' views of teaching the Holocaust to P7 pupils?
- What do parents learn about the Holocaust through their children's study of it?

This research analyses data from oral feedback from a small group of parents whose children learned about the Holocaust in their last year of primary. There were two child cohorts who were from the same school, had the same teacher and studied the Holocaust in 2015 and 2016. Interviews were conducted with parents in 2017 in pairs, with one parent interviewed alone. All parents, bar one, were female and all participants were white. Approximate age range of parents was 30 – 45 years of age. Participants were selected by 'opportunity' or 'convenience' sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017) in discussion with the CT, and approached and recruited by the researcher; they were parents who frequently communicated with, and had positive relationships with the school. Hence the sample was not a representative class sample and is susceptible to bias.

Interviews were semi-structured with set questions asked but room for the interviewer and participants to clarify and ask further questions when necessary to aid understanding. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length and recorded using dictaphone in MP3 format and were transcribed once all of the interviews had been completed. Analysis did not begin until all interviews had been conducted and was carried out using NVivo 8 software. Two types of analysis were conducted using a combination of interpretive phenomenological analysis techniques (cf. Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2010) and grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2009). In the first analysis initial coding saw each interviewee's answers

coded individually by question using 'in vivo' codes. The aim here was to preserve participant voice. This was followed by 2nd level coding which coded participant answers to each question more thematically before a 3rd level of coding which looked for commonalities across participants. The second analysis focussed on participant narratives and initial coding used values coding (see Saldaña, 2010) analysing individual participant narrative across questions. These codes were then used to develop themes across each individual participant's narrative in the 2nd cycle of coding, followed by a 3rd cycle which compared similarities across participant narratives, again using thematic analysis.

Research Findings and Discussion

A consistent finding of the analysis was that participants felt the Holocaust can be a suitable topic for P7 children depending on how it is taught. Participants felt that the content taught in their school was appropriate to their children's age but this might not be appropriate for younger children. This was influenced by a perspective that sees children and adults as qualitatively different in their thinking and social and emotional understanding. It was also influenced by parents' focus on the horror of the Holocaust, in terms of the concentration camps and systematic murder and the view that children need to be protected from potentially traumatic things. Participants also consistently emphasised their trust in their child's teacher to present the facts and also not present anything that their children would be unable to cope with or would traumatise them. Participants felt that the teacher presented the topic to the children very well with a focus on facts and good links with other parts of the curriculum. In particular they felt *Hana's Suitcase* was engaging, thought provoking and very well pitched to the level of emotional understanding of their child.

Further, whilst participants felt that they had not learned anything new about the Holocaust in relation to facts or specific knowledge, they noted that they had taken on a new and different perspective to the Holocaust after experiencing the learning through the eyes of a child and their children. They talked about seeing the Holocaust through the eyes of a parent and this having a huge emotional impact on them. They talked of being able to connect their knowledge of the Holocaust to a more personal experiential understanding and talked about the individual journey of Hana. In particular, participants commented on the intense and lasting impact the assembly had on them and how their children's involvement in the music had increased this emotional impact.

The Personal Narrative

Participants noted how their experience of the topic through their children's learning had meant they learned to experience and understand the Holocaust in a new and different way.

I hadn't heard of Hana's suitcase so the actual story, what that personal journey was, was new to me which was good...but I have to say that the assembly was very good cause it was a new angle...it wasn't about we're going to sit down and watch this really depressing thing about all these people are getting murdered...it was more of a celebration really, even though she died, I felt it was more of a celebration about her life. (Parent 3)

Participants talked about perceiving the Holocaust through fresh eyes; the eyes of a child, the eyes of a parent, and empathising with how it must have felt to have been a Jewish child or parent during the Nazi regime.

I learned more of just say, well kind of what happened to families more...and it was like, say with her book, like, it was a children's point of view and it was funny, in a way you didn't think of a children's point of view, you just thought of the parent's point of view, of an adult, because a lot of times in documentaries and that you only kind of see the adults...And the documentaries and stuff in the concentration camps you didn't really think of it it's children and to think of it from a child's and I say that the fact that it's, as a parent what child's going and what child's staying, you know, to think of it that way. (Parent 4)

for me it was good to see it from a parent's point of view and see how that, how it impacts on a child... Erm, but I think that, from, as a parent it's being able to talk about it with it with your child and answer your child's questions from their point of view rather than from, as opposed to as a teacher in a classroom situation... But actually the emotional connection that you have with your child when you talk because there is that sense of sitting down with them and talking with, how it must have felt for her family, for her and, you know, what these camps would have been like and mums and dads want to protect their children and the powerlessness of it all. (Parent 5)

Participants commented how much their children had engaged with the topic. The comment of parent 2 is indicative of the view of all of the parents.

I think the way it was approached and the way it was taught, great, I think it was very positive... L was certainly very interested in it and she's retained a lot of information so yeah, I think that speaks volumes. (Parent 2)

Psychological Harm

Parents' initial concerns about teaching their children about the Holocaust had been focussed on the horror of the Holocaust.

when we got the letter to say that L was going to be doing, doing the Holocaust I did take a kind of (breathes in and makes face) oh, you know like 'oh god' you know, like my goodness, how are they going to put that

across... will she be told any, you know 'horrific stories' will they see lots of images that will stick in her mind. (Parent 2)

I always think of those horrific photos you see of the piles of bones and people's belongings and things. (Parent 7)

Parental concerns, common across narratives, were influenced by a view that that children's social and emotional understanding was qualitatively different to that of adults and thus they were vulnerable to becoming traumatized by difficult and sensitive topics.

I think for some children if they are very (pause) sensitive, sensitive children they would probably struggle with some of that stuff and I mean, I can picture images in my head now from something, whether it's been from a book or a movie but, you know, it's just, it's horrible, it doesn't really leave you and I think (pause), I'm more equipped as an adult to deal with that and, you know, for children aged 12 or so they were when they were learning this, it needs to be managed quite carefully because that could really traumatise some of them. (Parent 1)

In this respect participants were mixed in their views of whether it would be appropriate to teach children younger than P7 about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, all parents reported that their children in P7 had not experienced any traumatic effects from learning about the Holocaust in school.

now got an understanding of what the Holocaust was and but not in a way that's upsetting to her. (Parent 2)

Because the topic had been outlined to them beforehand by the class teacher, and because they trusted the class teacher, all participants reported that they had no continued concerns. The comment by Parent 6 is indicative of the sentiments of the rest of the parents

We did get a letter, I'm sure Mr X(teacher) had written a really sensible letter like, this is going to be aimed at their age group, and so, I felt confident that he wouldn't be showing things that I didn't want them to see. (Parent 6)

Inter-Generational Learning

Participants reported that the topic had been presented in a way that focussed on the facts and had good links across the curriculum.

There was a piece of music or something like that as well about that camp. They were all learning to play a piece of music or something as well. (Parent 1)

And we had interesting conversations about religion. And religious people... And all of that, you know. 'How come' you know 'religious people because they' you know, talked about sort of the whole the idea that the Jewish community were targeted by people who went to church. (Parent 5)

I was pleased that he was doing that as part of the topic cause I think that is a, obviously really relevant to world war two... and there's other issues even relevant to things going on today so I was pleased that he covered that about, just general prejudice and treating people, you know, fairly and then the unfairness of the situation so I think it was could that all those things came out. (Parent 7)

Most of the parents, when asked directly whether they had learned anything new about the Holocaust either said that they hadn't or that they had but couldn't remember what specifically. One parent indicated that she had learned a lot through her child's learning of the Holocaust and this had had a big impact on her

I didn't know a lot about it myself so it was good for me because then I started googling and reading up on a lot of stuff and going 'oh, she's going to ask me 10 million questions, I'm going to have to be google this and find out about it'. So it was good for me as well because I actually learned an awful lot about it myself of, even wee things you didn't realise had happened and stuff... Yeah, I did learn a lot of different aspects of it. (Parent 4)

Nevertheless, despite saying that they hadn't learned anything new parents did say that their children's study of the topic had prompted lots of conversation and discussion at home.

I would never have just had a conversation with him about it had it not been something that he was doing in class...it's not really something that I would say 'right children, we're gonna sit down and talk about the Holocaust'...so I think, yeah, even from that point of view if to have those conversations has been good. (Parent 1)

I think just discussing it with her and just me giving her bits of information and then she was talking about it refreshed my memory a little bit. (Parent 2)

we talked about how easy it is to demonize the whole German people and say 'well they all just stood back and let it happen'. But then, you know when you talk about it and you think, do you know... How, how would you, what would you do if there were a whole troop of soldiers at your door and it's either you or the, you know it's, it's easy to judge from a distance as well so, erm. Yeah. It was, it was good, very interesting. (Parent 5)

Finally, in relation to learning about the Holocaust from a new perspective parents were struck by the intense and emotional impact the end of topic assembly had had on them. Parents talked about the influence of the music and how this had connected the learning on an emotional level

It was very very moving... I've still got, I've got the music that they did, that Mr X (teacher) had written. (Parent 4)

quite moving... Now I'm thinking, actually, I can feel it... A hush, a hush in the hall watching it and participating... It makes it real. (Parent 5)

I remember it very clearly... think it was, I remember being very emotional about it, I think it was... It was just, it was definitely very emotional... It was very haunting... And I still feel quite emotional thinking about it now, actually. (Parent 7)

Conclusions

Two relevant tentative conclusions can be derived from the findings of this research. According to the parents in this study, primary children can relate to the Holocaust as a topic in school as long as it is handled sensitively and accurately and in a way that enables them to engage. However, trust in the class teacher was a key factor in parents' positive response to the topic being taught and alleviating their concerns that their children may find the topic difficult or traumatic. Thus parents' experiences and perceptions of the teaching of the Holocaust in primary school is very likely to depend on the talents and skills of individual teachers and the relationships that parents have with these teachers.

Nevertheless, materials and content do need to take into account the distressing and sensitive nature of the content of Holocaust education (refs) and recognise that younger children, who have less life experience and thus developed coping mechanisms, or children who might be experiencing personal difficulties themselves, do need to be protected from trauma and psychological harm. This research showed that these concerns were at the forefront of parental attitudes to teaching of the Holocaust and that sensitive teaching, trusting relationships between school and home and the careful selection of the teaching materials and their presentation were crucial factors in alleviating any concerns. The selection of materials and approach to teaching also took into consideration the ways in which children would be likely to engage with the content. Choosing a narrative approach that focussed on experience at the level of the child which children could more easily identify with was something that appealed to parents. Parents indicated that the narrative style, whilst a highly engaging story of one child's journey, enabled important facts to be presented in such a way as to provide sufficient historical content but also allowed children to distance themselves, to some extent, from the trauma and so remain emotionally and psychologically safe.

In evaluating this research it is argued that one of its strengths is that it provides, more broadly, some insight into parental views about the teaching of sensitive and difficult educational topics. In addition, the analysis compared the themes derived from more than one coding method to develop a robust interpretation of the data. Of course, given the size and sample of this research it is not possible to generalise the findings across schools in Scotland, although it does provide a starting point for exploring parental views further. The most obvious weakness in this research is the small size of the sample, and the school context. We recognise that the teacher in this sample is not necessarily typical of all teachers and thus it is impossible to replicate the specific talents and skills of the individual teacher and their influence on this research.

Yet, our research findings demonstrate that parents' of primary pupils do have concerns about their children learning about the Holocaust. Our findings show that the class teacher can address these concerns through his communication with parents, by his teaching this topic in an age appropriate way and by his effectively meeting the needs of his pupils. This suggests that parents' concerns are not necessarily a barrier to teaching the Holocaust to primary pupils. Indeed one might consider that primary teachers should expect parents to be concerned about their teaching the Holocaust to pupils this age, and keen to engage with their class teacher to find out more about his teaching of this topic. Our findings show that one class teacher effectively addressed parents' concerns and that this had a positive impact on the teaching of the Holocaust in the school and on some parents' understanding of the Holocaust.

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