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Seeing the world today from a different viewpoint: the impact of the Lessons from Auschwitz project on schools in Scotland.

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Abstract

Auschwitz remains the epitome of inhumanity and barbarism. In 2007, the Holocaust Educational Trust organised the first Lessons from Auschwitz (LFA) project for Scottish schools. Its participants were two plane-loads of Scottish pupils and teachers from 31 local authorities – typically two pupils from a school accompanied by a teacher. This research, funded by the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Pears Foundation, involved these participants being invited to complete an online questionnaire with selected follow-up interviews. The aims were to evaluate the LFA project and provide insight into the impact this project had on individuals, schools and communities. This paper will report on: Student evaluation of the LFA project; The impact of the LFA project on individuals, schools and local communities; Conclusions as to the value of the LFA project in Scotland

Introduction

Designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1979 (Auschwitz- Birkenau Memorial and Museum online, 2007), educational school visits to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (ABMM) have been organized and subsidized by The Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) since 1999 and are integral to the Lessons from Auschwitz (LFA) project (Holocaust Educational Trust, 2006). The title of this project suggests that its aim is for participants to learn universal lessons of the Holocaust and not exclusively ‘about’ the Auschwitz and/ or the Holocaust.

The LFA project comprises four components: an orientation seminar the week before the visit at which a Holocaust survivor speaks to the group (4 hours) and participants are prepared for their visit; the visit to ABMM which includes visiting the concentration camp Auschwitz 1, and Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp (1 day); a follow-up seminar which takes place one week after the visit at which students are debriefed, given opportunity to reflect on the visit (4 hours) and discuss practical approaches to progressing with the final Next Steps component where students are required to organize a school and/or community event as a means of passing on their learning. To ensure participation from as many UK schools as possible, two students, between 16 and 18 years and an accompanying teacher, from each school are allowed to annually participate.

Five hundred thousand visitors annually visited ABMM between 1989 and 2005. Of these half were young people, and 40-45% were from overseas (Wollaston, 2005). Until 2006, 3800 UK students and teachers had participated in the LFA project (HET, 2006). Because of financial constraints and difficulties in accessibility this had included a small number of Scottish participants and in 2005, the Member of Parliament and Member of the Scottish Parliament for East Renfrewshire (Scotland), in conjunction with the Holocaust Educational Trust, facilitated a visit to ABMM for Scottish students and teachers This experience was different to the LFA project in that it consisted of one component only - the visit to ABMM.

Since 2007, there have been two annual LFA projects for Scottish students and teachers. This study examines the views of students who participated in the first LFA project in Scotland in 2007. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the impact this experience had on students with regards to their personal growth, participation and action in their schools and wider community.

Review of Literature

Adorno’s statement “it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz” (in Klaus, 2005), conveys the idea that the constraints of conventional language hinder one’s expression of the Holocaust and sets Auschwitz apart from everything else. In the school context, Dudek similarly claims that Auschwitz cannot be taught, like other subjects, within the curriculum (in Holden and Clough, 1998). Although neither

Auschwitz nor the Holocaust are school subjects as such, it follows that as alternative educational tools, museums and memorial sites, have an important contribution to make. For Marcus, museums provide “more hands-on ways than an average classroom setting” to learn about the past (Marcus, 2007:106). The pedagogical aims of visits such memorial sites are to enhance ‘students’ factual knowledge.... but also to allow them to find their own way of understanding and coming to terms with German history’ (Rathenow & Weber in Holden and Clough, 1998:96). Its historical relevance for Scottish pupils is to provide insight into European and British history and further their understanding of World War Two (WW2).

Oleksy claims that the young visitor’s place of origin is an important factor in determining their meaning of Auschwitz (in Davies, 2000). Although Scotland had a lesser role in the Holocaust than countries in mainland Europe and England, it has many links with the Holocaust, some of which are close to Auschwitz. These include Scots born missionary Jane Haining, who saved Jewish children in Hungary and ‘died’ in Auschwitz in 1944; the capture of Rudolf Hess, deputy leader of the Nazi Party in the Scottish village of Eaglesham in 1941; and becoming ‘home’ to a number of Auschwitz camp survivors. In addition to each country’s participation in WW2, Gundare and Batelaan consider that the nature of Holocaust education varies according to the country’s history of anti-Semitism (Gundare & Batelaan, 2003). While there is no formal historical record of anti-Semitism in Scotland, one cannot assume that it has never existed. The annual (UK) Community Security Trust (CST) reports evidence of recent anti-Semitism in Scotland and indicates that there were fifteen anti-Semitic incidents in Scotland in 2007, and nine in 2008 (BBC, 2006; CST, 2009). It is likely that these reports are not an accurate reflection of the actual number of anti-Semitic incidents that took place as they do not include unreported anti-Semitic incidents. Cowan and Maitles additionally cite specific anti-Semitic incidents between 2002 and 2004 (Cowan & Maitles, 2007:116).

While agreeing that Auschwitz involves ‘a study of anti-Semitism’, Miller suggests that Auschwitz is important to anti-racist education in recognising the Nazi persecution of people of different backgrounds and those who colluded in the genocide that occurred (in Copley, 2005). Garside considers that a visit to Auschwitz links the genocide of Jews and the murder of other European citizens to present day genocide (Garside, 2008). Wollaston challenges this and states that ABMM has avoided addressing the relationship between the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, “preferring to focus solely on the history of the camp, and more recently, Polish Jewish relations” (Wollaston, 2005:79). This suggests that one’s understanding of contemporary racism and anti-Semitism may not necessarily be increased by a visit to ABMM.

There are two principal reasons as to why young visitors require to apply analysis when visiting museums rather than adopt a passive receptive stance. Firstly, despite the educational nature of this visit, visits to ABMM are often referred to as the ‘dark side of tourism’. This is because ABMM is a site of mass tourism as well as mass murder, which is perceived by many as “commercial political and religious exploitation of the site” (Wollaston, 2005:66). Secondly, museums are becoming more sophisticated in how they present the past (Marcus, 2007), tend to ‘promote a moral framework to the narration of historical events’, and have a ‘missionary’ quality (Williams, 2007:8). This can be due to the respective people and/or guides being so dedicated and committed to their work that they lack a critical attachment to the respective historical issues or to the museum’s or government’s own agenda. Blum reported in 1989 that the ABMM did neither adequately recognize the distinctive fate of Jews and Gypsies /Roma as ethnic groups targeted for extermination nor clearly explain that an attempted genocide of the Jews had taken place, yet this had been clearly addressed on his return to the ABMM in 2003 (Blum, 2004).

Smith recognises the value that Holocaust memorial museums have in ‘developing and deploying Holocaust educational programmes’ but considers that they are no substitute for school-based Holocaust education (Smith 2007:282). This is of particular relevance to the Scottish context where Holocaust education is not a named subject or topic in the Scottish curriculum and its teaching depends on individual school policy, and/ or interested teachers who integrate it into the curriculum (Maitles and Cowan, 1999). This means that unlike their UK peers in England and Wales, or their European peers in France or Germany, Scottish students may not have studied the Holocaust prior to their participation in the LFA project. They may however, have encountered relevant themes through Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies, History, Modern Studies and/or Citizenship Education. Oleksy (in Davies 2000), Rathenow and Weber (in Holden & Clough 1998) and Copley (2005) state that it is important that young visitors have some knowledge of the historical context of Holocaust prior to their visit to ABMM.

One distinctive feature of citizenship education in Scotland is that it is not taught as a separate subject but permeates the curriculum (LTS, 2002). The new Scottish curriculum, entitled Curriculum for Excellence includes 'responsible citizenship' as one of the four purposes of the curriculum for students from 3-18 (Scottish Executive, 2004). To achieve this, students are required to: 'have respect for others'; 'develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it'; and 'develop informed, ethical views of complex issues'. The importance of knowledge in meeting these aims cannot be underestimated. The former UK Home Minister, David Blunkett considered knowledge to be "crucial to the life of a democracy", stating that "the more people know, the more they do" (Kiwani, 2008:45). There is a wide range of research that supports the positive contribution of Holocaust education to developing students' understanding aspects of citizenship (Cowan & Maitles, 2007). However, understanding is only one side to citizenship; 'behaviour and action' is another (Kratsborn et al, 2008).

Method

The potential sample was 153 schools from 31 of the 32 Scottish local authorities who participated in the LFA project in September and October 2007. Of these, 28 authorities agreed to participate in this study which together with a small number of Independent Schools, totalled 236 students. Agreement to participate in the study was three tiered with permission being first obtained from the Directors of Education from the above authorities, then from the respective Head Teachers and finally from the students. This resulted in an actual sample of 105 students from 27 authorities representing a response rate of 41%.

An online survey was chosen because it allowed researchers easy and instant access to a relatively large number of students across the country. Researchers also considered it to be more appealing to young people than a traditional questionnaire and likely to yield a higher response rate. Lefever et al (2007) identify efficiency, convenience, low cost and its capability of being used within a short time frame as advantages of this method of data collection. While they found the unreliability of email addresses to be a problem in online data collection, this was not apparent in this study as students were only required to complete the survey once and submit to the given mailbox and the selected programme 'Survey Monkey' allowed this facility with ease. The problem that the researchers identified with this programme was that students could submit more than once which would skew the results. Researchers emphasised to students that they were to submit once only. As information on the survey required students to indicate the authority they came from, and researchers knew the number of students from each authority who went on the LFA visit, researchers were able to ensure there were no duplications.

Surveys were piloted in February 2008 and distributed to students between March and August 2008. The survey was mainly structured, consisting of 32 questions comprising different types. These were: 'yes/no', 'rating', 'statement that best describes my' questions, and open questions which allowed opportunity for individual comments. This study's 41% response rate contrasts with the findings of Granello and Wheaton (2004) who reported significantly lower response rates from online data collection. This can be explained by development in online survey programmes since the date of their research, and also that researchers in this study were working with a clearly identified group of people. This facility allowed students to complete the survey at one session or if preferred to partially complete the survey and submit at another session. The expected time of survey completion was 15-20 minutes. Online programme records show that the majority of students had taken more than 15 minutes to complete the survey with many taking considerably longer. This suggests that students gave considered responses.

Findings

The Research Sample

Survey data provided a profile of the research sample. Table 1 shows an over-representation of females which can be explained by information from HET that the gender composition of LFA groups tend to be 66% female students and 34% male students. This suggests that the sample in this research is therefore only slightly over-represented by female students. Table 1 also shows that the majority of students had studied History at Higher level although this does not necessarily mean that they had studied the Holocaust. It also indicates that the sample were academic as one would expect less able students to take less than four Highers in one sitting.

Table 1: Profile of Sample

CATEGORY	%
GENDER	72% FEMALE: 28% MALE
SCHOOLS	96% STATE: 4% INDEPENDENT
EXTERNAL EXAMINATIONS	85% FOUR OR FIVE HIGHERS IN S5
SUBJECT CHOICE	63% HISTORY HIGHER

Knowledge

Table 2 shows that the vast majority of students had learned about the Holocaust prior to the visit to ABMM. As students were allowed to give more than one response it is possible that the same students studied the Holocaust both at primary and secondary and so it cannot be assumed that the 30% students who had not studied the Holocaust at secondary had not learned about it at primary. These results suggest that while the Holocaust is not a compulsory topic in secondary schools, it is being taught widely. One limitation of this question is that what one student considers to be 'a little' knowledge another may consider to be 'some'. Yet the 5% who learned about the Holocaust after the visit and 19% who knew 'little' about Auschwitz suggests that a small number of students participated in the LFA project without adequate prior knowledge.

Table 2 : The statements that best describe my knowledge in this area are:

CATEGORY	%
I learned about the Holocaust at primary school	26%
I learned about the Holocaust at secondary school	70%
I learned about the Holocaust after the visit	5%
I knew something about Auschwitz	75%
I knew a little about the Auschwitz	19%

Personal Growth

Students perceived that the visit to ABMM had contributed to citizenship education in terms of their understanding of anti-Semitism, genocide, the plight of refugees and human rights and their historical understanding of WW2. Table 3 shows that the highest growth areas were human rights and genocide. This challenges Wollaston's view (2005) and supports Garside (2008) by showing that the ABMM experience is not exclusively about 'history', 'the Nazis' or 'the Jews' but allows young people to develop their awareness of contemporary issues in the wider context. Given the treatment and murder of Jews in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, it is surprising that the highest growth area was not anti-Semitism. This may be due to the complexities of the term 'anti-Semitism', and/ or its historical origins and/or students having a consistent low understanding of anti-Semitism. The complicated nature of the relationship between Holocaust education and teaching anti-Semitism has been highlighted in previous research where students who had studied the Holocaust had not learned about anti-Semitism (Cowan & Maitles, 2005, Maitles & Cowan, 2007). The lowest growth area in social issues was 'refugees' which may only have received indirect references. The data suggests that the students would benefit from more focus on 'anti-Semitism' and 'refugees' during the visit.

Table 3: The visit helped me understand.....

CATEGORY	%
Anti-Semitism	85%

Genocide	90%
Refugees	72%
Human rights	96%
W.W.2	70%

The following quotes are further evidence of students' personal growth:

I found the whole experience moving, but the aspect that stands out is the room full of hair- this was especially distressing. I was also shocked by the size of Birkenau, how it was so open, its silence and its proximity to towns nearby-I always thought that the camp would be more hidden and isolated. (Student 1)

I found the rooms in Auschwitz 1 filled with human hair, shoes, suitcases, and baby clothes very moving. All of these made me start thinking about all these people who had their full lives ahead of them and its all been taken from them through no fault of their own. And it made you wonder, if this was your family back then, it would it would have been them. (Student 2)

Our visit made me realise the value of human life, and our remarkable ability to maintain hope even in desperate situations. (Student 3)

Museum exhibits and artefacts such as the piles of artefacts expressed by Students 1 and 2 may motivate students to further their learning in this area (Rathenow & Weber in Holden & Clough, 1998) but may also overwhelm students and result in students ignoring essential knowledge of historical events (Smith, 2007, Young, 1993, Rathenow & Weber, *ibid*). The quotations show that the visit contributed to students' growth in many diverse ways and provide insight into the nature of the personal experience which Claire considers to be a contributory factor in the young people's consideration of broader political and ethical matters (in Osler, 2005).

School And Community Impact

The Next Steps component led to students contributing to their school and/ or community. Though a required component of the LFA project, the wide range of activities which students had prepared and the originality of some of these activities, are evidence that the LFA project had a significant impact on schools and their communities. The following results show student involvement in school activities:

- 64% students spoke at a school assembly
- 40% students wrote an article for the school magazine
- 20% students produced a video presentation for the school
- 44% students made a display of photos for the school

Additional school activities included four students presenting to each year group, and another two students organising a 5th/6th year conference. The following quotes provide insight into the originality of additional school activities:

We made up an eight week lesson plan in the subjects History, English and Religious and Moral Education for a second year class based on ideas we got from the Holocaust; discrimination, racism, etc. Before the lesson began we organised a visit from a Holocaust survivor to our school who spoke to the second year class as an introduction to the Holocaust.

Met with social education teachers and helped to draw up a lesson plan to be implemented in younger classes discussing the Holocaust and the lessons that can be learned from it today.

In Modern Studies (after the visit) we discussed the link between the Holocaust and other genocides such as Darfur and Rwanda. We also discussed racial inequality within various countries today and the global response to the violation of human rights.

Data shows that a far greater number of students carried out activities in their school than in their community. The following results show student involvement in activities in the wider community:

- 48% students featured in the local newspaper
- 10% students produced a video presentation for the community
- 15% students helped to organize a community event

Additional community activities included a small number of students giving presentations to their local Members of Parliament and Members of Scottish Parliament, the Guild of a local church and to the local Rotary Club, and a Holocaust memorial evening open to all the public.

Conclusions

This study provides insight into Scottish students' knowledge of the Holocaust prior to the visit and the impact this had on their schools and communities. That 70% of students learned about the Holocaust at secondary school suggests that significant numbers of Scottish teachers are teaching it in their classrooms despite it not being mandatory. However there is evidence that a small number of students knew very little about the Holocaust prior to the visit and this is an area of concern. Evidence of personal development with pupils perceiving knowledge gains in social and historical issues supports the rationale of the project being more about the universal experience of the Holocaust than the particular. An increase in knowledge in anti-Semitism was not the students' top learning experience despite its close relationship with Auschwitz. This raises the question, 'If anti-Semitism is not the priority of learning in this context, in which context can students learn about it?' The perceived highest gains in human rights and genocide suggest that the wider lessons of the Holocaust are being seriously recognised by students.

Returning to their schools, students clearly took their responsibilities very seriously and organized a wide range of events in their schools and communities, although this study does not address the quality of these activities. Although it is unclear whether the LFA project led to an increase in the formal teaching of the Holocaust in schools, the activities prepared and presented by students led to more school students and people in their wider community being aware of the Holocaust.

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