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# **Learning the lessons of the Holocaust? A critical consideration of the antiracist and citizenship potential of Holocaust education in English secondary schools**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper I draw upon data collected as part of a national study of current practice in Holocaust education within English secondary schools. The paper emphasises the importance placed by teachers from a variety of subject backgrounds upon study of the Holocaust as an opportunity to explore citizenship related and antiracist concerns. However, the paper also identifies and discusses a number of potential challenges and possible limitations apparent in this approach.*

## **Background and methodology**

The original study was conducted by the Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP) at the Institute of Education (University of London) in order to provide a research informed basis from which to design and deliver targeted continuing professional development to support teachers in this field. The Holocaust has been a compulsory component of school history courses at Key Stage Three (for students aged between 11 and 14) since the introduction of a national curriculum in 1991. The HEDP research also demonstrated that it is commonly included in units of study by teachers from a variety of other subject backgrounds, most notably, religious education, English, citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE). However, very little guidance is given to teachers concerning the approach they could – or should – take to teaching this very complex and often unsettling period of European history. The current history curriculum for example, simply states that all students must be taught about:

the changing nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples and its lasting impact on national, ethnic, racial, cultural or religious issues, including the nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust, and the role of European and international institutions in resolving conflicts. (QCA, 2007, p 116)

The HEDP research therefore sought to investigate exactly what was going on in classrooms when students and their teachers encounter the Holocaust: How did teachers chose to present the subject? Which individual events and topics did they most regularly include? How many lessons did they spend? What resources did they use? How extensive (and how accurate) was their background knowledge? And what specific support or training had they received? (For a full examination of these and other questions see HEDP, 2009.)

A mixed methodological approach was employed. For 15 weeks between November 2008 and February 2009 a web-based survey comprising 54 different questions was made available for secondary school teachers to complete online. In total, 2,108 responses were received. 1,193 of these responses came from teachers with prior experience of teaching about the Holocaust. 591 respondents had taught about the Holocaust principally within history classrooms, 269 within religious education, 72 within English and 34 and 33 within citizenship and PSHE respectively. Although the online survey produced an opportunity sample, the research team were satisfied that the age profile, gender composition and ethnic breakdown of respondents broadly reflected that of the wider teaching community.

Follow-up interviews were then conducted with small groups of up to four teachers at 24 different secondary schools. In total, 68 teachers took part in interview: 54 were history teachers, 9 taught religious education and 5 taught other subjects including citizenship, geography and combined humanities. The schools visited for interview were purposely chosen to provide representative variation in terms of geographic location, school type, examination performance and social demographic mix of pupil intake.

### **Concerning teaching aims: What do teachers consider to be the importance of teaching about the Holocaust?**

It may at first appear that citizenship as a disciplinary subject makes only a relatively minor contribution to Holocaust education in England's secondary schools: only three percent (n34) of the experienced teachers who took part in the HEDP survey identified citizenship as the principal subject in which they taught about the Holocaust. However, it is worth highlighting that respondents were also asked if there were any additional subject areas in which they taught about the Holocaust and here a further 142 identified citizenship. Moreover, it is especially interesting to note that even when teaching in other subjects such as history, English or religious education, within both the survey and follow-up interviews a clear majority of teachers commonly emphasised what could be characterised as citizenship education teaching aims.

An early question within the online survey listed 11 possible teaching aims and asked respondents to indicate the three that they considered most important when teaching about the Holocaust (see Table 1 below). A free-text box accompanied the question in case any teachers wanted to add their own unlisted suggestions or provide any further explanation or commentary.

By a clear majority, the most commonly prioritised teaching aims were, 'to develop an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping in any society' and, 'to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again' (chosen respectively by 69.7% and 55.6% of teachers with experience in this area). As Table 1 also illustrates, there was relatively little variation in the teaching aims prioritised by teachers from different subject backgrounds.

During interview, teachers were given greater freedom to articulate their own teaching aims. While a small number spoke in terms of helping their students develop specific historical or theological understandings, more teachers suggested that, 'with the

Holocaust . . .there has to be *deeper* aims' (emphasis added). Such aims appear to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries and are oriented towards overarching, ambitious social, moral and/or civic concerns (see also Russell, 2006 and Hector, 2000). Many teachers spoke of hoping they could help facilitate the 'moral development' of their pupils, contribute to 'changing society' or promote ideas of 'tolerance', 'understanding diversity' and 'respecting one another and each other's views'. Others spoke directly of their concern that students should finish their study of the Holocaust 'with a sense of hopefulness' or sought to encourage and empower their students with the belief that their actions mattered in the world. One teacher reported that she wanted her students to achieve, 'an understanding of how, when it's [left] unchecked, the human race is capable of unspeakable atrocities'. Moreover, she wanted to encourage her students to consider it their 'duty', 'as human beings' to be vigilant against such evils.

**Table 1: Variation in teachers' aims by subject (percentage of total responses within each subject group)**

Teaching aims	All experienced teachers (n 1,193)	History teachers (n 591)	RE teachers (n269)	English teachers (n72)	Citizenship teachers (n34)	PSHE teachers (n33)
A: to develop an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping in any society	69.7	67.1	76.1	71.8	73.5	70
B: to reflect upon the theological questions raised by events of the Holocaust	8	0.7	31.3	2.8	0	6.7
C: to reflect upon the moral and/or ethical questions raised by events of the Holocaust	28.9	21.9	44	28.2	32.4	13.3
D: to reflect upon political questions, about power and/or abuse of power, raised by events of the Holocaust	19.8	25.6	6	18.3	11.8	16.7
E: to explore the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organisations, and governments when confronted with human rights' violations and/or policies of genocide	33.4	34.9	22	33.8	35.3	33.3
F: to deepen knowledge of World War II and Twentieth Century history	17.4	25.9	2.6	11.3	5.9	6.7
G: to preserve the memory of those who suffered	21.6	22.5	21.3	25.4	23.5	16.7
H: to understand and explain the actions of people involved in and affected by an unprecedented historical event	12.1	17.5	5.6	7	8.8	10
I: to explore questions about the foundations of Western civilisation	0.8	1	0.7	1.4	0	0
J: to explore the implications of remaining silent and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others	28.7	25.3	29.9	36.6	35.3	43.3
K: to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again	55.6	55.1	56	57.7	55.9	70

Of course, these teachers are not alone in their aspirations. The sociologist Theodor Adorno famously expressed an ostensibly very similar sentiment in his 1966 radio lecture, *Education After Auschwitz*, when he insisted that, '[t]he premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again' (Adorno 1998, p 191).

However, among my colleagues within the HEDP – many of whom were trained as historians and as history teachers – both the survey data and interview responses were viewed as a potential cause for some concern. Within the academic discipline of history, a number of theorists and researchers have warned against ‘practical’ or ‘present-oriented’, instrumental uses of the past (see for example, Tosh, 2008, Kinloch 1998 and Lee et al., 1992). From these perspectives, the past informs and shapes the present and the future in more subtle and complex ways than the notion of identifiable and neatly packaged ‘lessons from the past’ suggests. Or, as one of a small number of dissenting teacher voices among the survey ‘free-text’ responses argued:

My problem with the above aims is that they are using history for other purposes, which I believe to be an abuse. I would argue that the Holocaust should be taught in itself as one of the more significant events in twentieth century, and that young people should expect to know about it and draw their own conclusions - including that the Holocaust is not alone as such an atrocity, albeit probably the most systematic version of it.

In this paper it is not my intention to arbitrate or distinguish between appropriate ‘historical’ or ‘non-historical’ teaching aims. On the contrary, I consider that insisting that there is a clear dichotomy between ‘historical’ and ‘civic’ or ‘social’ understandings is not always helpful. Instead my concern is to critically explore how effective a ‘learning the lessons of the Holocaust’ approach might be. More specifically, I want to suggest that there are at least three potential limitations or challenges to consider within existing classroom practice as documented by the HEDP.

### **Challenge one - Making progress?**

I think [attainment targets] are a nonsense when it comes to the Holocaust. I think that’s a paper exercise that I regard as completely meaningless here and I think our progress is much more on a personal level with those individual students . . . where you can see them maturing in their thought. And you can’t quantify this can you? That’s the problem . . . I don’t think you can quantify it until they’ve left school, until they’re old enough to reflect back on their experiences. (History teacher, London)

Like the teacher quoted above, a number of those who took part in interview suggested that, unless they were teaching older students as part of an A-level or GCSE examination syllabus, the Holocaust was an area of study in which they considered it was either impossible or inappropriate for learning to be formally assessed. Again, this was a way in which the Holocaust was distinguished from most other components of Key Stage Three history. Unlike ‘evaluating source materials’ or ‘developing chronology skills’, aims such as ‘tackling racism and prejudice’, ‘transforming society’ or even ‘testing students’ humanity’ are especially difficult to meaningfully measure or observe.

In the absence of quantifiable measures for these aspects of students’ progress, many teachers suggested that the impact of their teaching would only be observable at an unspecified point in the future, if at all. Some recounted the feeling of reward they had experienced on specific occasions when, for example, they saw students drawing their own connections between the Holocaust and contemporary issues, both on a national

scale (such as the British reaction to recent asylum seekers and economic migrants) or within their personal lives (such as school-based bullying). Others, however, used a tentative language of what they ‘hoped’ or were ‘trying’ to help their students achieve. Observing a similar language used by history and RE teachers in her own (2006) study, Jane Clements describes teachers’ ‘hope’ or ‘belief’ in the ‘deferred benefits’ of their work with students in schools.

It would be unhelpful to suggest that all valuable learning outcomes must be quantifiable or easy to observe. It is nonetheless a potential challenge if teachers are unclear as to how to judge their students’ progress and/or the effectiveness of their own pedagogical approach. Arguably, the question of what counts as making progress in citizenship and social or moral education – and whether, or how, it can be meaningfully ‘measured’ – is of much wider relevance and implication than our discussions here. Yet it appears to be an area in which those who teach about the Holocaust – very few of whom are likely to have received specialist training in citizenship education or its pedagogies – could benefit from insights and reflections which may be being shared and developed elsewhere in these fields.

#### **Challenge two: Displacing context?**

Inquiry must be made into the specific, historically objective conditions of the persecutions. (Adorno, 1998, p 203)

It’s trying to make them realise that it is not something which is one country or one particular set of circumstances - that actually maybe it is something deeper about the human condition. It’s something that actually exists within all of us.  
(History teacher, South East)

I think it’s about tolerance, about understanding diversity, about them respecting one another and each other’s views and . . . that actually without that something as drastic as that could happen again.  
(History and citizenship teacher, West Midlands)

It’s kind of, get them to understand that it’s not just . . . an isolated experience. And it’s certainly not something that just happened in history and will never happen again: that they’ve actually got to take some active role in that.  
(Geography teacher, West Midlands)

Although they share an important sentiment in wanting to educate to help prevent future human rights atrocities, it is instructive to critically contrast the instruction given by Theodor Adorno with the perspectives offered by the three teachers quoted immediately above. Adorno emphasises that the ‘specific, historically objective conditions’ of the Holocaust must be understood, but precisely these contingent conditions are displaced or undermined where teachers argue that ‘[the Holocaust] is *not* something which is one country or one particular set of circumstances’ (emphasis added). Here, as in a number of other teacher interviews, the Holocaust appears to take the form of a universal cautionary tale: a dramatic example of an always extant danger, intrinsic in human

nature. Inadequate attention is drawn to the specific social, political and economic circumstances under which that danger has been historically realised.

One teacher explained that she purposefully did not want to locate her students' study and understanding too specifically within Nazi Germany in case doing so encouraged 'anti-German sentiment'. Another expressed concern not to 'just package [the Holocaust] away' within a particular place and time. Many agreed that it was important to make the message appear relevant to students' contemporary lives. 'Racism', 'prejudice' and 'intolerance' were therefore regularly cast as the catalysts for danger: without 'tolerance', 'respect' and 'understanding [of] diversity', 'something as drastic as [the Holocaust] could happen again'.

Teachers also often suggested that they wanted to encourage students to identify their own responsibilities for safeguarding a tolerant society. Some went as far as to suggest to students that 'a slippery slope' exists 'from bullying to genocide'. From an active citizenship perspective, it is important that students are offered a framework from which they can act and arguably the micro-level of school based bullying offers an instructive and empowering opportunity for students to feel able to 'make a difference'. But there are of course very significant differences between bullying and genocide. Perhaps the lesson that 'it all starts with bullying', as one history teacher emphasised, fails adequately to engage with all the many times throughout history that expressions of prejudice and discrimination *have not* led to extreme, state-sponsored violence or genocide. More importantly, it detracts from the particular social, economic and political context of Nazi Germany in which the Holocaust did in fact take place.

Likewise, making students aware of 'the dangers of racism' might appear a fairly uncontentious and relevant teaching aim. However, wider research in the field of antiracist education warns that 'racism', 'prejudice' and 'discrimination' can be vehemently rhetorically rejected without ever being adequately understood (Bhavnani et al., 2005; Gillborn, 1995). These same writers would again emphasise the importance of understanding context. 'Racism', 'prejudice' and/or 'intolerance' are not fixed and consistent phenomena that can be used to explain events such as the Holocaust, but rather, there are different racisms and expressions of prejudice and intolerance in need of explanation and investigation themselves.

As my colleagues and I argued in the original HEDP report:

students are likely to have deeper and more valuable understandings about the human condition, about society and about the world around them if their reflections take account of the complexity of the past. Indeed, if students are able to properly contextualise a study of the Holocaust within secure knowledge and understanding of the events of that time they are likely to be better able to relate the Holocaust in meaningful ways to discussions about other genocides and ongoing crimes against humanity. (HEDP 2009, 102).

Unfortunately, the HEDP research also suggested that not all teachers have an entirely accurate understanding of this past. The Holocaust is clearly a very complex area of historical enquiry but it is also a subject around which many popularly held



misconceptions exist. Such misconceptions could lead to potentially rather spurious citizenship ‘lessons’ being learned. To illustrate, one question included within the research survey asked,

If a member of the German occupying forces refused an instruction to kill Jewish people, the most likely outcome for that individual would be . . .

- shot for refusing to obey orders
- sent to a concentration camp
- excused from the killing and given other duties
- sent to the Eastern front
- not sure

As the commentary provided in the HEDP report goes on to explain,

Although explored as a possible line of defence during the Nuremberg trials, no record has ever been found that a German soldier was killed or sent to a concentration camp for refusing such an order. Most historians today (Browning 1992; Friedlander 1998; Goldhagen 1996) suggest that the most likely consequence was that a soldier would be excused from the killing and given other duties. (HEDP, 2009, p52)

However, the answer widely shared among academic historians was chosen by only 19.3% of all respondents with experience of teaching about the Holocaust (26.2% of history teachers, 10.6% RE teachers, 8.5% English, 12.5% citizenship and 16.7% PSHE). Many more teachers considered that the most likely outcome was the individual would be shot for refusing to obey orders (38.5% of experienced teachers including 32% of history teachers, 47.9% of RE teachers, 49.3% English, 31.3% citizenship and 26.7% PSHE). In a 1999 article on antiracist education and the Holocaust, Geoffrey Short urged that teachers and students should engage with the extensive historical and psychological literature exploring perpetrator, bystander and collaborator actions and motivations (see for example Browning, 1992). The HEDP survey would appear to suggest that many teachers remain unfamiliar with this research.

### **Challenge three: Denying difficulty and containing complexity**

A further consequence of dominant ‘lessons’ such as, ‘racism is dangerous,’ or, ‘prejudice is wrong’, is that both teachers and their students may be encouraged to distance themselves from or deny the inevitable and ongoing challenges and potential tensions that twenty-first century multicultural democracy necessarily entails. Critically, the notion that a lesson – or series of lessons – has been *learned* from the Holocaust suggests that such tensions and challenges have been (or can be) finally resolved. ‘Equality’, ‘democracy’ and ‘humanity’ are all important but complex and contested terms. I would argue that they are – and should remain – difficult to think with and through but they risk becoming platitudinous in the versions of citizenship and antiracist education that some of those teaching about the Holocaust appear to employ.

At one point during the HEDP survey, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, ‘I find that having students from diverse cultural backgrounds

influences the way I teach about the Holocaust'. They were also invited to further explain their response. It became immediately clear among the contributions made that there is no single agreed upon answer as to how best to respond to cultural diversity within the classroom, let alone wider society.

The ethnic mix of a class should have absolutely no bearing on how the Holocaust is taught and nor does it affect my teaching in any way - it doesn't alter the facts in any way. (History teacher)

The prime consideration when teaching any topic is for it to be meaningful. As a teacher I have to take into account the audience and teach to their specific needs and background. (History teacher)

It does not make sense to me to teach the Holocaust by showing my students who are mainly black African 'dead white Jews'. It makes MUCH more sense to teach about the Holocaust through survivors of Darfur and Rwanda, because they can relate to these faces, these people. (Religious Education teacher)

Regardless of culture the Holocaust is relevant and deferring from the teaching to accommodate cultures detracts from the impact of the topic. It is not a pretty thing to teach, but an absolute necessity. (History teacher)

### Opportunities?

Rather than deny that teaching about the Holocaust offers important potential for exploring citizenship education and antiracist aims, I end this short article with a series of questions that I consider these teachers' comments, and the wider HEDP research have raised.

- What does it mean to belong to or be identified as a member of a particular 'ethnic', 'religious' or 'racial' group?
- Who can, or should determine an individual's 'specific needs' and relevant 'background'?
- When might our understandings of 'fairness', 'equality' and/or 'justice' fail?
- How far do our responsibilities to each other – and which 'others' – extend?
- How best can we understand the relationships between individuals and wider social structures and/or forces?
- What should be the roles or responsibilities of individuals *and* national or international governments and organisations when confronted with human rights abuse?
- Whose history is the Holocaust?

Perhaps, instead of approaching the Holocaust as a unit of study through which specific lessons will be learned, teachers and their students could encounter the Holocaust within their curriculum as a space in which these and other key questions for citizenship, social, moral *and historical* education can be explored.

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