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“I’ve always not been a racist”: Should we reconsider the teaching and learning about the Holocaust?

Sylwia Holmes

I didn't stop being racist because of [learning about the] Holocaust ... I've always not been racist. (Ella, Year 12 student, Peterborough)

In popular, political and even educational discourse, it has become commonplace to assert that it is crucially important for young people to learn about the Holocaust as an intervention against today's racism and prejudice. But in a focus group interview exploring secondary school students' attitudes towards encountering this history, Ella, a Year 12 student, turned that idea on its head.

Ella was one of more than 9,500 students consulted by UCL researchers as part of a three-year national study investigating 'What Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust' (Foster *et al.*, 2016). The study drew primarily on survey responses from almost 8,000 students and focus group interviews with nearly 250 more. Launched by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education in February 2016, it is the biggest study of its kind in the world. Its findings ask serious questions of educators: what *should* young people know about the Holocaust and *why*?

Since 1991, the Holocaust has been an established History topic within the National Curriculum. Yet during that time, the reasons *why* the Holocaust is educationally important have seldom been clearly or explicitly articulated among teachers, politicians or policymakers. Facing limited curriculum time, teachers are often uncertain about what content to include or prioritize and, more importantly, what the educational aims of teaching about the Holocaust should be. The Centre's earlier

study, 'Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools', established that teachers of various subjects were most likely to understand their mission as enabling students to 'understand the ramifications of racism', 'transform society' and 'learn the lesson of the Holocaust to ensure that it never happens again.' However, as the study went on to argue, such universal trans-disciplinary aims can prove very difficult to teach and they create problems in defining specific learning objectives or assessment criteria.

The Centre's most recent, student-focused study raises further questions about the educational effectiveness of these teaching aims. Students seemed to share some of their teachers' appreciation for broad, ethical aims but they also stressed the importance of historical knowledge and the moral duty towards the victims. Some 85 per cent of students surveyed agreed that the reasons this history should be taught was so young people might 'understand where racism can lead', 'respect the memory of the victims', 'stop something similar happening again', 'deepen their historical knowledge' and 'learn about what caused the Holocaust.'

Although 83 per cent of the students agreed that it was important to study the Holocaust and 85 per cent said that they had learned about the Holocaust by Year 10, the research found that many lacked core knowledge and understanding about the topic. More than half of the younger students – Years 7–9 – believed that Hitler was solely responsible for the Holocaust. The research revealed that there

were many misunderstandings as to who the Nazis were and about the other organizations, groups and individuals involved. The main motivations for the actions of the perpetrators were believed to be the result of brainwashing or fear. Very few students understood the various roles played by ordinary people and by the regimes that collaborated with the Nazis in the ways the Holocaust proceeded, and neither did they know about the widespread outcomes.

The narrow views held by many of the students – that the oppressions and genocides were effected by Hitler and a small group of leading Nazis rather than by thousands of people across Europe – highlights their poor understanding of where responsibility for these actions lies and about who was complicit in the atrocities. If students were more thoroughly informed and aware of the different agencies, organizations, groups and individuals within the Nazi regime in Germany or elsewhere in Europe, they would be able to examine with some acuity the complex and uncomfortable questions about these people's roles and accountability. But because of the horror of the crimes committed, young people often perceive the perpetrators as distinct from the rest of humanity, not as human beings like others, but as 'them'.

Without a thorough understanding of who the perpetrators were, what their motivations were and what socio-political context drove their actions, students struggle to grasp how ordinary people committed acts of such unspeakable brutality and what the events of the Holocaust reveal about the human condition. The young people who view the Holocaust through a narrow, German-centric or Hitler-centric lens are ill equipped to deal with complex questions surrounding levels of responsibility and complicity.

Lessons should give attention to the not always clear distinction between perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders. Doing so would

open up questions about the human reasons behind these historical events. Once they have a grasp of these issues, students will become better able to move beyond erroneous or undeveloped understandings of who did what during the Holocaust. If students believe that the Holocaust was due to the desires and actions of one man – Hitler – they are unlikely to be able to address the crucial issues of individual and societal responsibility, agency and choice. Whereas knowledge of the roles of the collaborators, perpetrators and bystanders and an understanding that many individuals were complicit in the atrocities will enable students to consider the profound implications and deep significance of the events.

The research showed that the students' knowledge of victim groups was inadequate and their understanding of why and how the chosen victims were persecuted was poor. The students taking part in the survey were aware that the fate of the Jews was distinctive but struggled to explain why and in what ways. When asked who the Nazis' policy of 'killing every last person from this group wherever they could reach them' applied to, they named several victimized groups. This shows that they did not grasp the essential fact that different policies were enacted against different groups for different reasons and that the mission to totally exterminate the Jewish people was distinct from the experiences of the Roma and Sinti, Jehovah's Witnesses, LGBT people or those with disabilities, say. Understanding this fact is vital – not to grade the suffering but to make clear the intent of the actions taken against Jews. When asked how many Jews were killed during the Holocaust, almost half of the students failed to identify the accurate answer. It was clear that they had no idea that the Nazis' policies and systematic murder devastated Europe's Jewish population. Even fewer of the students realized the scale of the destruction perpetrated against Jewish children.

Critically, while most of students knew Jews were the primary victims, they had

little understanding of why this group was persecuted and slaughtered. Because 68 per cent of the students didn't know the meaning of antisemitism, the particularized racial hatred of the Nazi project wholly escaped them. When specifically asked 'Why the Jews?', the students' explanations often relied on misconceptions and pejorative stereotypes of Jewish people rather than looking for reasons in the worldview of the perpetrators. For example, a number of students alluded in interviews to the Jews being 'rich' or as 'having power' and therefore being perceived as a threat. Often the students' view of the Jewish people was limited to religion and they tried to explain that the Jews were targeted because of religious intolerance. Young people were unfamiliar with pre-War Jewish life; only very few realized the size of the Jewish populations in certain areas of Europe and how greatly their socio-economic status varied within and between countries.

The study found that the victims were not recognized as separate groups or individuals but perceived as a universal collective whose experiences are all alike. This carries the connotation that all groups were persecuted for the same reasons, that the same policies were enacted against them and that they all shared the same fate. It is essential that students understand how the experience of the Jews and other groups of victims were distinctive and why the Jews were specifically targeted. If they are to comprehend how the Holocaust could unfold, knowledge of how the Nazi regime used legislation to create an impression of the legality of these murderous proceedings and how these policies developed in line with the events before and during the war is essential.

Our survey and the interviews revealed that many students were even unsure about when and where the Holocaust took place. Having a clear understanding of the chronological and geographical development and its relation to the events of the Second World War is the

fundamental first step. The students' lack of any such understanding led many to present a German-centric picture of the Holocaust. They overestimated the number of German Jews killed, believed that the perpetrators were virtually all Germans and assumed that most were killed inside Germany.

The young people also struggled to explain what Britain knew about the systematic slaughter and its response to the Holocaust. Many believed that people in Britain knew nothing about it, while others said that once the government knew about the mass murder of the Jews they declared war on Germany.

Even knowing the sequence of historical events does not ensure that the students comprehended the relationships between them or what they signified. But when they don't know these facts, students struggle with accessing more complex concepts like the formulation of policies and their fluid and progressive character, and grasping what determined such processes. The chronological development of the Holocaust was very closely linked with the events of the Second World War, which opened new geographical locations. Students who understand that the Holocaust developed over time to becoming a continent-wide genocide where the perpetrators sought to ultimately kill every single Jewish person, wherever they could get at them, will come closer to understanding the significance, impact and true enormity of its scope and scale.

Awareness of this historical context would enable students to understand some of the patterns and processes that led to the Holocaust, such as the involvement of not only different groups of Germans and but of local people elsewhere. Only then might they address the complex questions surrounding responsibility and complicity and consider the complex and controversial issues around Britain's response to the Holocaust.

Implications for pedagogical practice and developing educational policy

None of these findings are intended as criticisms of students or teachers. Rather, they are likely to reflect the severe constraints on the curriculum and the problematic manner in which the Holocaust is so often framed in popular discourse. What students know is shaped in large part by representations and discourses that circulate outside the school. Many of these misconceptions still prevail among even those who have been taught about the Holocaust in school.

Effective teaching about the Holocaust should ensure that young people gain substantive knowledge and understanding, challenge popular misconceptions and confront difficult and profound questions. Lessons about this history should give them a chance to examine and reflect on: the experience of different groups of victims, the motivations of the perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders and the choices they made and the temporal and geographical development of the Holocaust. The relationship between what students know and the sense they make of that knowledge is hugely important. It is possible to know key facts about the Holocaust yet have no sense of what caused it, how events unfolded over time or what their significance was. Knowing the facts will not ensure that students will automatically be able to construct sophisticated, nuanced accounts of the Holocaust. However, the acquisition of more developed conceptual knowledge will allow them to recognize and challenge narrow or erroneous narratives that circulate in the broader culture. Students who employ both key substantive knowledge and informed conceptual understandings will better appreciate and understand this part of history.

Learning about the Holocaust should not only deepen students' knowledge and develop their critical thinking, it should also support students' emotional literacy and thus help them face this dark and challenging history. As Bauman (1989) observed:

... the most frightening news brought by about the Holocaust and by what we learned of its perpetrators was not the likelihood that "this" could be done to us, but the idea that we could do it.

Teaching about the Holocaust asks that teachers provide students with not only knowledge and understanding of what took place but with the means to cope emotionally with what they have learned. Equipping young people to think critically and independently and to meaningfully reflect, will help them confront the difficult realities of the Holocaust. To address the poor understandings and challenge the prevailing myths and misconceptions, teachers require considerable knowledge, expertise and appropriate resources. Because the academic interpretations are still fluid and unstable it is difficult to present students with a clear narrative and chronological framework. Meaningful professional development would enable educators to carefully consider aims, content, assessment and pedagogical practice and help them to increase students' knowledge and understanding, challenge accepted representations of the Holocaust and deal with complex issues. The importance of progression over time in learning should be emphasized in this training. It would allow different subject specialists to determine how to achieve a coherent whole school approach that would deepen students' understandings at various stages of their education.

To achieve this, however, teachers need clear recommendations on the explicit educational aims of the work and the amount of time required to teach the Holocaust adequately. The 2014 curriculum provides no guidance on what should be taught about the Holocaust. Neither does it specify what students might reasonably be expected to understand about it. And with no assessment framework, how can students' progression be monitored?

Releasing teachers to attend quality-assured professional development programmes would

improve their teaching and address vulnerable areas – such as the appropriate progression in students’ learning as they go through their schooling – identified by this and the previous research (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2009), such as the appropriate progression in students’ learning as they go through their schooling. University-led, research-informed and empirically tested CPD could be effective in improving teaching and learning about the Holocaust, and it is important that the government continues to invest in such programmes.

In dealing with the subject in schools, education must be clearly distinguished from commemoration. Eminent historian Professor Yehuda Bauer, honorary chairman of the 31 nation state International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), declared that: ‘the Holocaust is too often turned into vague lessons of the danger of ‘hatred’ or ‘prejudice’ at the expense of really trying to understand the reasons and motivations for the genocide’ (quoted in Foster *et al.*, 2016). Foster *et al* are

convinced that ‘specific knowledge content does matter, especially with regard to the forms of understanding it allows or impedes’. Meaningful education with ‘secure historical knowledge is an important basis from which powerful understandings of – and from – the Holocaust can ultimately be drawn’ (Foster *et al.*, 2016).

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