Teaching about the Holocaust in English schools: challenges and possibilities

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Teaching about the Holocaust in English schools: challenges and possibilities

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This article presents some principal findings from the first comprehensive national study of Holocaust education in England, which was conducted by the University of London’s Institute of Education. More than 2000 teachers provided insight into their teaching about the Holocaust, including their perceptions, perspectives and practice. This article identifies what appears to be some of the key challenges and concerns teachers encounter when teaching this emotive and complex subject. The findings suggest that teachers both value and recognise the importance of teaching about the Holocaust to young people. However, more than 80% of teachers declared themselves to be ‘self-taught,’ having previously had no professional development or formal instruction in teaching about the Holocaust. The research also demonstrated: (1) considerable uncertainty about the best way to teach the subject; (2) some ambiguity over aims and definitions; (3) narrowly focused content coverage; and (4) a lack of in-depth subject knowledge among many teachers. A central finding is that teachers proved more likely to focus on what may be termed perpetrator-oriented narratives: narratives that focus on the actions of the Nazis and their collaborators and commonly positioned Jewish people and other groups as silent and anonymous victims without agency or influence.

Keywords: Holocaust education; England; teaching; professional development; curriculum

The Holocaust is a compulsory part of the national curriculum in English secondary schools. Since 1991, history teachers have been required to teach about the Holocaust to students aged between 11 and 14 (in Years 7–9). Although not mandatory, teaching about the Holocaust also occurs in a range of other subject areas (e.g. citizenship, English and religious education) and to students of all ages. In addition to the many ways in which young people encounter the Holocaust in the formal curriculum in England, the Holocaust has, of course, entered into the consciousness of teachers and students through the media, popular culture, books, museum exhibitions, memorials and academic writing. However, despite this widespread engagement with events and narratives related to the Holocaust, limited attention has been paid to how teachers understand the Holocaust and how they teach about it in schools.

This article focuses on some of the principal findings of the first ever, comprehensive national study of Holocaust education conducted by the Institute of

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Education (IOE), University of London. It draws on the responses of more than 2000 teachers to provide important insights into their perceptions, perspectives and practice in relation to teaching about the Holocaust. It also raises significant questions about the most appropriate ways to teach this most challenging and complex subject.

**Previous research in Holocaust education**

Although no large-scale national study of compulsory Holocaust education in England was conducted before 2009, an important and growing body of research-informed literature in this area exists. For example, a number of writers have conducted small-scale survey and/or interview-based research, both with teachers (including, for example, Hector 2000; Russell 2006; Short and Reed 2004; Supple 1992) and with pupils (including, Maitles and Cowan 2007; Short 2005). This research has helped to identify a variety of salient issues and themes. For example, in their 1998 study, Brown and Davies reported an apparent confusion or lack of clarity among teachers over their aims when teaching about the Holocaust (see also, Fox 1989). Russell (2006) built upon this observation suggesting that, within the group of history teachers she interviewed, a tension or inconsistency often existed between the aims that were considered important or appropriate when teaching about the Holocaust and broader, disciplinary (here ‘historical’) aims. Clements (2006) also described uncertainty, doubt and confusion among both history and religious education teachers as to the ‘outcomes’ teachers wanted their students to achieve.

Research also has drawn attention to a number of recurring, potential challenges facing teachers in this area. Some of these appear as practical obstacles such as: insufficient curriculum time (Brown and Davies 1998; Hector 2000); limited opportunities for effective collaboration across departments (Brown and Davies 1998); and teachers who considered themselves ‘under-informed’ and/or ‘under-resourced’ (Supple 1992). Other researchers also described a variety of social, political and even philosophical concerns: How should teachers deal with students’ prejudice, for example, What is an appropriate level of emotional engagement or objective neutrality? Is the Holocaust really ever possible to ‘understand’? (Burtonwood 2002; Carrington and Short 1997; Short 1994).

In addition to the research conducted in England, a number of key international studies have also contributed to a broader understanding of Holocaust education. In Sweden in 2008, under the auspices of ‘The Living History Forum’, a major national survey of Holocaust education was undertaken. This survey included a range of attitudinal and knowledge questions and received over 5000 responses. The author concluded that although ‘… teachers generally feel that teaching the Holocaust is important … Many history teachers lack the knowledge necessary to convey insights about the Holocaust to their students’ (Lange 2008, 90). Reflecting the findings in England outlined above, ethnographic studies in Germany have identified a marked uncertainty over teaching aims and learning outcomes. For example, Kuhner et al. remarked that ‘teachers are not always aware that they are overloading the situation with too many aims’ (2008, 4) and Meseth and Proske who found that such uncertainties expressed themselves as a ‘tension between over-and under moralizing’ (2010, 207).

In Switzerland, a study based on interviews with history teachers found great enthusiasm for Holocaust education: ‘They declared that it was one of the most
important, if not the most important, topic to teach’ (Eckmann 2010, 8). However, the author also identified confusion over teaching aims. It was noted that teachers often were not able to differentiate between ‘disciplinary – historical’ or ‘memorial’ aims, and that they made links between history and citizenship or human rights education, which were often assumed rather than carefully thought through (ibid). In the USA, Schweber (2006) conducted a number of well-received ethnographic studies of classroom practice in Holocaust education. Among other issues, Schweber explored the tensions between ‘moral’ and ‘historical – disciplinary’ approaches, and sought to challenge these very dichotomies. Other studies have surveyed educational provision at state level (see, Ellison and Pisapia 2006) and engaged with the appropriateness and efficacy of the popular Facing History and Ourselves syllabus (Boix-Mansilla 2000).2

This emerging body of research offers important insights into teachers’ attitudes and practice in relation to teaching about the Holocaust. However, as referenced by many of the authors of these works themselves, they often were small-scale and tentative studies. It was in this context, therefore, that in 2009 researchers at the IOE produced the national study of Holocaust education in England.3 Moreover, during the period since the national study was produced (i.e. 2009–2012), the IOE’s research and evaluation team has engaged in a range of follow-up activities to more fully understand Holocaust education practice in schools across England.

Research design and methodology

The national research study conducted by the IOE was divided into two phases and employed a mixed-method approach. Phase one was based primarily on quantitative data derived from a detailed 54-question online survey completed by 2108 respondents; phase two involved a series of follow-up qualitative interviews with 68 teachers in 24 secondary schools in locations across England.4 Most of the survey questions were closed questions in which teachers were asked to choose from a list of suggested responses or to indicate agreement/disagreement along a five-point Likert scale. A smaller number of open- or free-text questions were also included for respondents to provide specific details or further commentary.

Although the 2108 teachers who completed the online survey represented an opportunity sample, the teachers who completed the study were broadly representative of teachers in English secondary schools in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, teaching experience, type of school and geographic location. In addition to the online survey, IOE researchers conducted group interviews, lasting approximately one hour, with 68 teachers in 24 schools across England. Focused primarily on history teachers, this purposive sample was selected to ensure a cohort of teachers broadly representative of the diverse range of schools and teachers in England. Using a semi-structured protocol, the interviews added depth and complexity to the survey data and provided a greater opportunity for teachers to explain their perspectives and practice.

In summary, the data from mixed-method approach provided substantial answers to a range of questions such as: in what subject(s) was the Holocaust being taught? To what age groups? For how many hours? What content did teachers include? What textbooks and resources did they use? What were the aims of teachers? How was the Holocaust defined? What knowledge did teachers have? What challenges did teachers face? and What preparation, training or support had teachers received?
The overarching challenge: meeting the needs of teachers

The national study demonstrated that teachers in England are very committed to teaching about the Holocaust. As evidence, 94.7% (n1002) of teachers stated that it would always be important to teach about the Holocaust in school and 85.1% (n887) agreed that it should be a compulsory part of the secondary school curriculum. However, the research also revealed that many teachers were uncertain about how to approach the Holocaust and considered it to be particularly difficult to teach. Of significance, 82.5% (n952) of teachers admitted that they were primarily ‘self-taught’ and 77.5% (n765) of teachers said that they would welcome an opportunity to attend professional development programmes to help them teach about the Holocaust more effectively.

It is important to emphasise that the research study and follow-up initiatives showed that many teachers are highly committed to teaching the subject and investing a great deal of personal time and effort in developing their knowledge base and professional expertise. Nevertheless, the research revealed a number of key issues, challenges and concerns associated with teaching about the Holocaust. It also exposed inconsistencies in teachers’ pedagogical practice and significant areas of uncertainty. The following sections specifically focus on five key areas related to teachers’ understanding and practice all of which have important implications for how young people encounter and learn about the Holocaust in schools (i.e. teachers’ definitions and understandings; aims; content choices; knowledge; and other broader issues and challenges). Understanding more fully the challenges teachers face undoubtedly is an important first step in developing and considering initiatives to support teaching about the Holocaust in effective and thought-provoking ways.

Teachers’ definitions and understandings of the Holocaust

In a previous study, Russell noted ‘a lack of consensus regarding the basic assumptions’ underpinning teaching in this area, such as what the term, ‘the Holocaust’ even means (2006, 45). An important focus of the study was to more fully appreciate teacher definitions of the Holocaust. Accordingly, when completing the online survey, teachers were asked to select from a list of seven suggested definitions the one that most closely matched their own (the full list of definitions can be located in Appendix I). In overarching terms, teachers’ responses generally revolved around two competing positions. By far the most popular choice, offered by 52.5% (n1038) of all respondents, was ‘Statement A’ which defined the Holocaust as:

... the persecution and murder of a range of victims perpetrated by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. They were targeted for different reasons and were persecuted in different ways. Victims included Jews, Gypsies, disabled people, Poles, Slavs, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners or war, Black people, and other political and ethnic groups.

Central to this definition or understanding of the Holocaust is explicit reference to all victims groups under one umbrella term with no particular distinction made for Jewish victims. In general terms, this selection was closely matched by those teachers 8.4% (n165) who selected ‘Statement D’ that also widened the use of the term to include the murder of millions of people considered ‘different’ from the concept of the ‘Aryan Master Race’.
In contrast to this broad and more inclusive use of the term, a smaller number of teachers identified the Holocaust as specifically related to the experiences of Jewish people. This more focused definition was reflected by ‘Statement B’ 24.8% (n490), or ‘Statement C’ 8.2% (n163). For example, ‘Statement B’ recognised that, although other groups were targeted for destruction, the policy towards the Jews was substantively different because, ‘unlike the Jews, there was no plan to murder every member of these other groups’ (emphasis added). More precisely, ‘Statement C’ provided a succinct definition of the Holocaust as, ‘the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately 6 million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.’

**Teachers’ aims when teaching about the Holocaust**

A vital aspect of the research was to try to understand more precisely what teachers were trying to accomplish when teaching about the Holocaust – what were their principal aims? The online survey explored this issue by presenting teachers with 13 possible suggestions and instructing them to indicate the three that most closely matched the aims they considered especially important (see Appendix II for the full list of aims). In addition to the wealth of data generated by the online survey, significant elements of the in-depth interviews provided intriguing insights into teacher aims. Analysis and categorisation revealed a complex range of responses, nevertheless, in overview, an overriding tension appeared to exist between those teachers who favoured studying the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon and those who sought to draw broader ‘universal lessons’ (e.g. tackling racism, or respecting diversity) often divorced from any detailed historical context.

On the one hand, therefore, the research findings demonstrate that the majority of teachers (across a range of subject areas) teach about the Holocaust as a ‘universal warning’ with the aim of addressing broader trans-disciplinary goals such as ‘understanding the ramifications of racism and prejudice’, ‘transforming society’ and/or ‘learning the lessons of the Holocaust to ensure that it never happens again’. For example, across all survey respondents, ‘to develop an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping in any society’ was the most popularly prioritised teaching aim, chosen by 71% (n1397). This goal was followed by the desire, ‘to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again’, chosen by 55.9% (n1091). This desire to pursue broader moral or attitudinal aims is reflected in the comments of one history teacher who declared:

I’ve got to be honest, I mean, the historical side of it is important, don’t get me wrong, but … when I’m teaching it, the moral significance of it – the human significance of it – is far more prevalent for me personally … And I’d be kind of worried if there were people there who were just really interested in the chronology. And if I came out of my lesson thinking that pupils in the class just thought of it as just another topic, I would be a bit disappointed. In fact I wouldn’t just be disappointed, I’d be really upset.

Representative of the viewpoints of many others, another teacher similarly revealed at interview that his aim was ‘to produce children who are imbued with moral values and with an ability to be heard’. Many teachers reasoned that providing students with a rudimentary understanding of the Holocaust offered young people the
possibility to explore and understand what can happen when racism or prejudice is not challenged.

In-depth interviews revealed that while the ramifications of racism and prejudice were a primary focus of teachers, very few described any attempt to help students understand the roots of these phenomena. In this respect, the specific and contingent context of Nazi Germany was scarcely referenced. The Holocaust itself appeared to take the form of an always and everywhere potential danger in many teachers’ accounts:

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.

On the other hand, in direct contrast to the overarching moral and civic goals articulated by large numbers of teachers, approximately 25–30% of teachers were keen to focus more specifically on understanding and explaining the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon not explicitly tied to broader aims. This tendency was more pronounced among history teachers. As one history teacher articulated:

I mean, in very simple terms, my aim really is – is for the students to understand and appreciate how this is a significant event in history. And they must understand that it is a significant event and why it is so. But … I don’t think it’s my job to sort of tell them the morality of this. It is for them to work it out … The way I approach it is in a very sort of straightforward way. I mean, you have to look at the context. You have to look at why it took place at that particular time and you also have to say what happened.

In a similar vein, many history teachers adopted the position that it was not for teachers to inculcate students with fixed, pre-determined ‘lessons’ from the Holocaust, but rather to provide young people with an in-depth understanding of its historical context so that they are able arrive at and articulate their own intelligent understanding of its significance.

**Teachers’ content choices**

Although the Holocaust is taught across a range of subject areas and to students of all ages, it is mandated to be taught at some point in the history curriculum to pupils aged between 11 and 14 (Years 7–9). The IOE research revealed that the subject is most commonly taught in history during the summer term of Year 9 (i.e. to pupils typically aged 14). Significantly, however, the national curriculum does not specify what topics should be taught, or how much time should be spent teaching about the Holocaust. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, a great deal of variety existed in how much curriculum time teachers devoted to the subject. Some Year 9 history teachers spent only one hour per year on the subject, whereas others reported spending 20 hours or more. In Year 9 history, teachers most commonly devoted around six hours of curriculum time to teaching about the Holocaust.

The research also exposed the difficulties teachers faced in trying to decide what topics or content to teach within an average of just five or six lessons. As one London-based history teacher remarked, ‘it is particularly difficult for Year 9 to know what to include and what to leave out’. A central aim of the IOE research therefore was, given the very real curriculum constraints on teachers, to understand more closely the rationale behind their content and topic choices.
As part of the online survey, teachers were presented with a list of 35 possible topics that could be incorporated into a study of the Holocaust (see Appendix III). Teachers were asked to indicate which topics they included in their teaching, marking each along a five-point scale from those they ‘never’ included to those they would ‘always’ include. Analysis of teachers’ topic choices suggested that rather than explore victims’ responses to persecution and genocide, teachers are more likely to focus on what may be termed perpetrator-oriented narratives: narratives that focus on the actions of the Nazis and their collaborators and position Jewish people and other groups as silent and anonymous victims without agency or influence.

Two content areas appeared to dominate teachers’ coverage of this period. First, focus on the events of the 1930s (including Hitler’s rise to power and the Nazi state; propaganda and stereotyping; persecution of the Jews; the Nuremberg Laws; and ‘Kristallnacht’). Second, an explicit focus on Auschwitz-Birkenau. In contrast, other content areas such as pre-war Jewish life, important stages in the development of the Holocaust during the war years, Jewish resilience and resistance, and the post-war legacy received less attention. In this regard, it is potentially significant that the Wannsee Conference, the mass murders by the Einsatzgruppen, and Operation Reinhard (the programme to murder some two million Jews in the German-occupied part of Poland known as the General Government, which resulted in the gassing of some 1.7 million Jewish people in the death camps of Belsen, Sobibor and Treblinka II) were among the topics least likely to be taught in English schools.

Furthermore, analysis revealed that teachers’ choice of topics seemed to indicate a tendency to regard the victims of the Holocaust more as objects rather than as subjects of study – a passive mass of people to whom things were done, rather than individuals actively responding to the unfolding genocide. Limited attention to topics such as life in the ghettos, the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Jewish resistance in the camps, the actions of Jewish partisans offers further evidence of the lack of focus on Jewish agency and the widespread dominance of a ‘perpetrator narrative’.

**Teachers’ knowledge of the Holocaust**

Teachers’ uncertainty over content choice may partly result from some apparent limitations in teachers’ subject knowledge. At this stage, it would be imprudent to make sweeping generalisations about teachers’ subject knowledge, as mapping knowledge in any subject is an inherently complex undertaking. However, initial explorations suggest that many teachers may have significant knowledge gaps in key content areas.

For example, as part of the online survey, teachers were asked nine multiple-choice questions. Of these nine were knowledge-based questions, six had a single correct answer. These knowledge-based questions focused on some key areas (e.g. victims of Nazi persecution; the names and locations of killing centres; the British government’s response to the Holocaust; where the Holocaust took place; and the location of Jewish resistance). In overview, only 48 of the 1816 (2.6%) teachers who responded to the online questionnaire answered all the questions correctly, whereas 687 teachers (37.8%) either provided one or no correct answer to any of the questions. It is not possible to examine the full and complex range of all responses here, but answers to one question offer some indication of the level of teachers’ content knowledge.
One question, for example, asked teachers what, in percentage terms, was the Jewish population in Germany in 1933? Teachers were offered five choices: more than 30%; approximately 15%; approximately 5%; less than 1%; and not sure. Of note, the correct answer (i.e. less than 1%) was provided by a relatively small number of teachers in all subject areas. In fact, just under a third of history teachers answered correctly and less than one-in-five citizenship, English and religious education teachers provided an accurate response. Many teachers significantly overestimated the pre-war Jewish population in Germany, with 40% of citizenship teachers, for example, claiming that the answer was approximately 15% or more than 30% of the population.

**Broader issues and challenges when teaching about the Holocaust**

One of the goals of the research was to capture a preliminary understanding of the extent to which students’ cultural backgrounds affected the way teachers approached the Holocaust. In overview, it appeared that teachers were somewhat divided in their approach to teaching about the Holocaust in multi-ethnic classrooms. For example, some teachers keenly emphasised that cultural diversity did not affect their teaching about the Holocaust. As two teachers individually explained:

> 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.

> I do not teach it to draw explicit moral lessons or sermons and so even in a school that is 70% Muslim with strong family links to Palestine, I still take a historical disciplinary perspective and so the cultural background of the class is the same as for all other enquiries.

In contrast, other teachers purposefully used the presence of minority ethnic students in the classroom as a way of making connections between contemporary experiences of racism and the lessons of the Holocaust. As one teacher remarked:

> [Cultural diversity] increases awareness that there are potentially many victims of modern holocausts/genocides or racism and it encourages an awareness of the need to try and empathise.

Often, the diverse experiences of students from minority cultures appeared as a resource from which teachers could draw. Indeed, some teachers explained how they directly invited students to share with the rest of the class their own experience of racism and/or prejudice. Many teachers believed that it was very important to make their teaching ‘relevant’ to students from diverse backgrounds, and as such, they developed their teaching of the Holocaust to draw parallels with other genocides or contemporary human rights violations.

A second issue expressly identified as a challenge by a number of teachers centred on dealing with students’ prejudices or ignorance. Significantly, teachers acknowledged that students’ lack of exposure to cultural difference often led to misunderstandings and prejudice among young people. As revealed by the comment below, teachers also suggested that addressing these ill-informed perspectives on the world often took considerable time, skill and confidence:
If you have two or three students who are quite vocally racist … it is important not to let their comments pass unchallenged and that’s where it is sometimes quite difficult. Because once you open up … something like a discussion on racism, you’ve got to allow it, not only to take its course, but also to ensure that it’s finished in a positive way.

Another particular challenge identified by a number of teachers focused on how best to respond to students’ misunderstandings – or lack of understanding – about the nature of ‘Jewishness’. Here, teachers described feeling particularly ill equipped to deal with students’ questions such as: ‘how did [the Nazis] know they were Jewish?’, ‘why did Hitler hate them?’, or ‘why did they admit they’re Jewish?’ without offering answers that risked reinforcing reductionist stereotypes.

A third area of explicit concern identified by teachers centred on students’ responses to emotive and potentially disturbing issues. Again, inherent tensions appeared as teachers articulated their concerns. For example, some teachers expressed frustration or disappointment that some students did not take the issue seriously enough and that inappropriate responses occasionally resulted. Some teachers worried that students were increasingly ‘anaesthetised’ to violence through interactions with computer-generated games or through watching graphic films and argued that it was difficult to ‘move’ students in deeply affective ways when teaching about the Holocaust.

On the other hand, a number of teachers expressed concern that the Holocaust was a potentially traumatising historical phenomenon – one that needed to be handled with extreme sensitivity and caution in the classroom. One teacher, for example, was especially concerned that some of the film and photographic footage used in schools had originally been produced by the Nazis to undermine and humiliate their victims. This teacher remarked that, while he wanted his students to be ‘shocked and horrified’, he was not sure that it was ‘morally appropriate’ for them to see films which showed, for example, Jewish people being forced to undress before being sent for execution. In a similar vein, other teachers explained how teaching about the Holocaust challenged their professional responsibility as they wrestled with the best way to engage with this traumatic event without upsetting the young people in their care.

Unquestionably, many teachers found the emotional aspect of the Holocaust particularly challenging. A number of teachers, for example, reflected on their attempts to make sense of and respond to the Holocaust – indeed some admitted that the Holocaust remained an episode that they personally struggled to understand. Overall, therefore, what emerges from a careful analysis of responses is a clear sense that significant numbers of teachers find the Holocaust a particularly difficult subject to teach. As indicated in this section, teachers commonly expressed uncertainty about how to deal with many complex and demanding issues (e.g. tackling prejudice or apathy; ensuring relevance for a diverse student body; and handling disturbing images and narratives). Many teachers also were aware that the pedagogical approaches they typically adopted might not always be the most appropriate ones to employ.

Discussion

The empirical findings outlined in the previous sections raise a number of issues that warrant further discussion. Firstly, it is important to note that approximately two-thirds of teachers appear to be employing a definition of the Holocaust that
runs counter to the general consensus of academic historians and the pedagogical guidelines of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Furthermore, although in interviews some teachers drew attention to the fact that different groups became victims of the Nazis for different reasons, very few teachers referred to the fact that it was only the Jewish population who were targeted for complete annihilation within Europe. Significantly, however, it is on the basis of precisely this distinction (i.e. that for the first time in history, the Nazis attempted to completely eliminate every member of a group, everywhere) that the Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer (2001) argues that the Holocaust is an ‘unprecedented’ historical event.

It is, of course, important to emphasise that a focused definition of the Holocaust as the genocide of European Jewry is not to ignore or downplay the brutal suffering of other victims of the Nazi regime. Neither is it to suggest that some victim groups suffered more than others. Rather, a precise definition of the Holocaust potentially allows students to understand more clearly that the persecution and experiences of different groups were not the same. Evidence from the national study, therefore, indicates that many teachers would benefit from opportunities to critically consider their definition of the Holocaust and its implications for classroom practice.

As outlined above, analysis of teachers’ aims when teaching about the Holocaust suggests a tension between two different approaches: one that promotes a more universal, civic and moral agenda and another that is focused more on disciplinary history. The obvious strain between the two different approaches to teaching the Holocaust has, of course, been identified in previous research studies (see for example, Hector 2000; Russell 2006; Supple 1992). Indeed, it is an area that has provided critical commentary from a number of scholars (see, for example, Kinloch 1998; Lee 1984; Lee et al. 1992; Tosh 2008). Above all, the research emphasises the importance of teachers’ critical and reflective consideration of the aims of their teaching and its pedagogical implications.

Thirdly, although the national research identified a firm commitment to teaching about the Holocaust in schools across England, it also exposed some key issues concerning the content choices of significant numbers of teachers. In particular, analysis revealed teachers’ limited attention to pre-war Jewish life and Jewish agency and resistance during the war. Overall, therefore, the study suggests that many teachers would benefit from opportunities to critically reflect on content matter and topic choices that are most suitable to promote a meaningful and effective understanding of the Holocaust.

Finally, the study suggests that a number of teachers may have important gaps in their content knowledge. As evidence, the example provided above demonstrates how large numbers of teachers overestimate the pre-war Jewish population in Germany. However, as Bauer (2001) has noted, a striking and unprecedented feature of the Holocaust was the irrational way that a small and vulnerable minority group was characterised as a deadly threat, which must be eliminated at all costs. As a result, therefore, it is arguably very important that teachers and their students are aware of the very small numbers of Jews living in pre-war Germany. If teachers commonly overestimate the size of the German-Jewish population (in some cases by 15 or 30 times), then it might be that myths and stereotypes about their power, wealth and control are inappropriately and unwittingly reinforced.
Although this example provides only a brief insight into levels of teacher knowledge, it may be potentially significant. Preliminary analysis does indicate, for example, that teachers may be more familiar with content knowledge related to the Nazi period up to the outbreak of the Second World War than they are with the development of the Holocaust during the period 1939–1945. Furthermore, the findings also imply that teachers may be more knowledgeable about the activities of the Nazis and their collaborators than they are about Jewish life and agency both before and after the war. Above all, this brief focus on teachers’ knowledge indicates that teachers in all subject areas could further benefit from opportunities to improve and extend their subject knowledge, thus ensuring that they have a rational and coherent basis from which to develop meaningful lesson plans and teaching resources.

Conclusion

In overview, the national study illuminated the complex and challenging issues encountered by teachers who teach about the Holocaust. Of significance, the research showed how teachers both value and recognise the importance of teaching about the Holocaust to young people and revealed high levels of interest in the subject. Nevertheless, the research also demonstrated considerable uncertainty among teachers about the best way to teach the subject, lack of clarity over aims and definitions, narrowly focused content coverage, and an apparent lack of detailed subject knowledge. Significantly perhaps, more than 80% of teachers declared themselves to be ‘self-taught’ – the vast majority of whom welcomed the opportunity to enrich their understanding of the Holocaust through participation in professional development programmes. Clearly, professional interest in teaching about the Holocaust in more effective ways is widespread. What is evident, therefore, is the need for teachers to have more opportunities to critically reflect on their own practice. Ideally, this critical reflection would best be carried out in collaboration with other teachers and Holocaust education specialists in such a way that they are able to build on their existing practice in order to clarify, share, discuss and deploy new knowledge and understandings. Through such endeavours it is hoped that, ultimately, teachers will be armed to teach about the Holocaust in more profound, meaningful and effective ways.

Notes

1. In 2009, researchers at the IOE’s Centre for Holocaust Education (formerly the Holocaust Education Development Programme) produced the 132-page national research study, teaching about the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools: An empirical study of national trends, perspectives and practice. The full report can be accessed at the centre’s website: www.ioe.ac.uk/holocaust

2. A useful overview to these debates in the USA is provided by Thomas Fallace, in chapter 7 of The emergence of Holocaust education in American schools, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). Particular mention should also be given to the extensive research and evaluation completed by Facing History and Ourselves over the past 3 decades incorporating more than 100 academic studies and including the most recent and comprehensive evaluation of the program’s effectiveness authored by Dennis J. Barr: The Facing History and Ourselves National Professional Development and Evaluation Project (NPDEP).

3. In direct response to a recognised need to improve Holocaust education in England, in 2008 the Holocaust Education Development Programme (or HEDP) was established at
the Institute of Education, University of London. Funded by the UK’s Department for Education and the Pears Foundation (a UK charitable trust), the HEDP was directed to achieve 2 interrelated goals. First, to produce the first ever large-scale, national research study into teaching about the Holocaust. Second, to use this research-informed understanding of existing practice to design, develop and deliver a high quality national professional development programme for teachers who teach about the Holocaust. Details of the HEDP’s work (now the IOE Centre for Holocaust Education) in professional development can be found on the website: www.ioe.ac.uk/holocaust

4. To ensure that the study incorporated the views of as many secondary school teachers as possible all secondary teachers in England were invited to complete the open access online survey. Thus, a national, cross-subject publicity campaign was launched to raise teachers’ awareness of the survey and to encourage them to take part. The campaign included: direct engagement with a broad range of subject associations, local authorities, and educational networks; email contact with all secondary schools in England through a purchased electronic database; email contact with head teachers through Department for Education electronic newsletters; engagement with Holocaust organisations, museums, and agencies in the UK; coverage in national newspapers (e.g. the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Times Educational Supplement) and selective advertising in nationally circulated educational magazines and journals. In addition, the open invitation to all secondary school teachers was further supplemented by a more targeted approach. The targeted campaign included: direct email contact with heads of humanities in secondary schools in England; advertising in professional magazines and journals (e.g. Teaching History); direct email contact with 1500 named teachers listed as teaching citizenship, English, history, humanities, PSHE and RE; and direct engagement with relevant contacts and networks in targeted subject associations (e.g., citizenship, English, history, RE). Following extensive piloting, the final version of the survey was hosted online as part of the HEDP website. It remained live for a 13 week period and all submissions were submitted via the online survey (note: no teacher took the opportunity to request a paper copy of the survey to be submitted by post).

5. When completing the survey, it was possible for respondents to entirely skip any individual question. As a consequence, the total number of responses received fluctuated throughout the survey. Unless otherwise stated, the percentages presented in this report have been calculated from the total number of teachers who submitted any response to the pertinent question.

6. It is difficult to be precise on the exact percentage because some teacher comments are open to interpretation. Nevertheless, based on careful analysis it is reasonable to place this figure at between 25 and 30%.

7. Kristallnacht (sometimes also referred to or the ‘Night of Broken Glass) is a euphemism for the more accurate and more appropriate term: November Pogrom.

8. Teachers also identified the Internet as a potentially problematic resource. Frequently they noted that students could be very indiscriminating in the websites they chose to visit and expressed concern that this exposed them to positions of Holocaust denial.

9. In December 2012 the Taskforce for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF) was renamed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). The organisation was originally initiated by Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson in 1998. The IHRA is an intergovernmental body supported by 31 member states and observer countries whose purpose is to place political and social leaders’ support behind the need for Holocaust education, remembrance, and research both nationally and internationally. The IHRA has produced educational guidelines for teachers which cover five primary areas including recommendations on ‘why, what and how to teach about the Holocaust’. The guidelines are internationally recognised as the key guiding principles for intelligent and sensitive Holocaust education (see, www.holocausttaskforce.org/).

Notes on contributor
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number of important books including War, Nation Memory: International Perspectives on World War II in School History Textbooks (2008) (with Keith Crawford). Currently, he is a series editor (with Ros Ashby and Peter Lee) of the International Review of History Education, a leading publication in history education.

References


Appendix I. Possible definitions of the Holocaust

(A) The Holocaust was the persecution and murder of a range of victims perpetrated by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. They were targeted for different reasons and were persecuted in different ways. Victims included Jews, Gypsies, disabled people, Poles, Slavs, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners or war, Black people, and other political and ethnic groups.

(B) The Nazis and their collaborators perpetrated crimes against humanity on millions of people. The Holocaust was the attempt to murder every last Jewish person in Europe. Other groups were targeted for destruction but, unlike the Jews, there was no plan to murder every member of these other groups.

(C) The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six-million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

(D) Hitler believed that ethnic Germans were the members of a ‘Master Race’. For the sake of their ‘new order’, which would see this ‘Master Race’ dominate the continent of Europe, the Nazis attempted to get rid of anyone who was ‘different’ from them and this resulted in the mass murder of millions of people: we call this the Holocaust.

(E) The persecution of Jewish people during the Second World War, which is often referred to as ‘the Holocaust’, has been exaggerated. The figure of six million killed is too high. While there is no doubt that many Jewish people died during this time, this was in the context of a world war where some 50 million people are believed to have been killed.

(F) The Holocaust has a universal meaning to describe unspeakable suffering, persecution and atrocity.

(G) The Holocaust is used in so many different ways, by different groups and individuals for different purposes that it has lost any specific and agreed meaning.

Note: teachers were also invited to add their own definition if the options provided did not closely match their views.

Appendix II. Possible aims for teaching about the Holocaust

Teachers were presented with the following list of 13 suggestions and instructed to indicate the three that most closely matched the aims they considered especially important when teaching about the Holocaust:

(A) to develop an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping in any society

(B) to reflect upon the theological questions raised by events of the Holocaust

(C) to reflect upon the moral and/or ethical questions raised by events of the Holocaust

(D) to reflect upon political questions, about power and/or abuse of power, raised by events of the Holocaust
(E) to explore the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organisations, and governments when confronted with human rights’ violations and/or policies of genocide

(F) to deepen knowledge of World War II and Twentieth Century history

(G) to preserve the memory of those who suffered

(H) to understand and explain the actions of people involved in and affected by an unprecedented historical event

(I) to explore questions about the foundations of Western civilisation

(J) to explore the implications of remaining silent and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others

(K) to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again

Note: Many teachers also took the opportunity to clarify and further justify their selections in a text box provided for open comment.

Appendix III. Possible content topics

Note: Teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which they included each of the following 35 topics when teaching about the Holocaust on a five-point scale ranging from ‘never’ to ‘always’.

- The long history of antisemitism.
- Jewish social and cultural life before 1933.
- The contribution of the Jews to European social and cultural life before 1933.
- National Socialist Ideology.
- The Nuremberg Laws.
- Neo-Nazism.
- Kristallnacht.
- The experiences of individual men, women and children who were persecuted by the Nazis.
- The impact of the policies of the Christian Churches.
- The choices and actions of bystanders.
- The choices and actions of rescuers.
- The reaction of countries around the world to Jewish refugees.
- The Katyn Massacre.
- An account of life in the Polish ghettos (e.g. Lodz).
- Resistance to Nazi policies by Jewish partisans.
- Operation Reinhard.
- The Einsatzgruppen.
- The Wannsee Conference.
- Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- Jewish resistance in the camp system.
- The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.
- Post-war justice and the Nuremberg trials.
- The experiences of Holocaust survivors since 1945.
- Changes in awareness and understanding of the Holocaust since 1945.
- Propaganda and stereotyping.
- Combating current racist ideology.
- The study of World War II.
- The study of Hitler’s rise to power and the Nazi State.
• The Arab/Israeli conflict.
• Other genocides.
• Exploring the concept of suffering.
• Human motivation and behaviour.
• The Holocaust as an unprecedented event in human history.
• Holocaust-related events (e.g. Holocaust Memorial Day).