

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's Continuity and Change Research Study – First Data Release:

THE IMPACT OF PRESSURES ON THE KEY STAGE 3 CURRICULUM ON TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST.

KEY MESSAGE

Researchers from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education note with concern the impact of wider educational policy changes upon teaching and learning about the Holocaust in England's secondary schools. Their research suggests that, within Key Stage 3 history, much more teaching about the Holocaust is taking place with younger year groups than it was ten years ago despite teachers' significant concerns that only older, Year 9 and above, students have either the necessary conceptual understanding or emotional maturity to fully engage with this history.

SUMMARY

Since 1991, the Holocaust has been listed as statutory content to be taught in all secondary schools following the English national curriculum, within Key Stage 3 history. In 2009, research conducted by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education reported that an overwhelming majority of teachers chose to deliver this content in the final terms of Year 9, as close to the end of Key Stage 3 as was possible. Teachers explained that they felt students needed sufficient maturity and to have developed trusting relationships within classes to meaningfully engage with this complex and confronting history.

However, ongoing analysis of comparative data collected in 2019 and 2020 indicates a marked increase in the proportion of teaching about the Holocaust that now takes place with younger year groups. **In 2009, only 4.9% of all reported teaching about the Holocaust in history took place in Year 8 classrooms. By 2019/20 this proportion had grown more than four-fold to 20.7%.**

Teachers who took part in the most recent research described this change as a direct consequence of some schools' decision to deliver the full Key Stage 3 curriculum in two rather than three years to allow students to begin working towards GCSE specifications. They also outlined with concern the challenges this presents to their teaching, the compromises they felt needed to be made in terms of the content they could confidently deliver and ultimately, the negative impact this then had on the depth of their students' understanding.

BACKGROUND

In 2009, researchers from what is now the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education conducted extensive national research to document when, where, how and why the Holocaust was being taught within secondary schools across England. Their findings provided the foundations for the Centre's extensive and acclaimed programmes of continuing professional development support for schools and teachers.

The intervening ten years have seen two changes of government, six different ministers responsible for education and the extensive revision and reform of the English national curriculum as well as the establishment of a Prime Ministerial Holocaust Commission and ensuing plans for the creation of a national Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre. To better understand the possible impact of developments such as these on classroom practice, in 2019 and 2020 UCL researchers returned to the field. Further information on the Centre's current study, *Continuity and Change: Ten Years of teaching about the Holocaust in England's Secondary Schools* (planned for full publication in September 2021), and its 2009 report, *Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools: An empirical study of national trends, perspective and practice* can be found at <https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/research/>. Both studies draw on extensive survey responses from almost 1,000 teachers with recent experience of teaching about the Holocaust as well as group interviews with 134 teachers from 45 different schools and 68 teachers from 24 schools in 2019/20 and 2009 respectively.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED FINDINGS

- History remains the subject area in which the majority of all reported teaching about the Holocaust takes place. In fact, its dominance over other subject areas appears to have increased over the last 10 years; **in 2019/20 history classes accounted for 68% of all teaching about the Holocaust reported by survey respondents compared to 57% in 2009**. This has been accompanied by **a notable decline in reported teaching taking place in Religious Education** which accounted for **27% of all teaching in our 2009 survey but only 17% in 2019/20**.
- **However, within history classes, there has been a striking shift in the proportion of teaching that takes place with different age groups.** In 2009, 49.1% of all reported history teaching about the Holocaust took place in Year 9, the last year of Key Stage 3 in which students are aged 13-14. Only 4.9% of reported teaching took place in Year 8 history classrooms and 2.7% in Year 7, with younger students aged 12-13 and 11-12 respectively. However, in 2019/20, while the proportion of reported history teaching taking place with Year 7 students had risen only very slightly, to 3.2%, among year 8 students, this had grown four-fold, to 20.7%. The proportion of teaching in Year 9 had fallen to 38.9%
- **In 2019, 29.2% of all those who taught about the Holocaust within Key Stage 3 history did so only within Years 7 or 8.** The equivalent proportion in 2009 was just 4.4%.
- In interview, several teachers explained this shift as **the consequence of some schools' decision to 'reduce' or 'condense' their Key Stage 3 curriculum** in order to introduce elements of GCSE programmes of study within Year 9. This trend was also identified in 2019 in research conducted on behalf of the National Education Union (www.tes.com/news/exclusive-63-schools-extend-gcses-key-stage-3)
- Indeed, among history teachers completing the 2019/20 survey, **almost 30% experienced 'Teaching [the Holocaust] to students in years 7 or 8 because of a two-year KS3 curriculum' as a challenge that they 'often' or 'always' encountered** and in interview, a number spoke of the **'reduced' and 'restricted' opportunities this presented to teach about this history in all its complexity.**

Some expressed concern that this had direct impact on historical understanding and worried that younger students were 'just not equipped to deal with it'.

- One survey respondent, for example, described the necessary changes in course content that her history department had recently undertaken 'due to a two-year Key Stage 3': ***'Previously teaching [about the Holocaust] in Year 9 meant the students were emotionally more mature. . . [Now, the] content has been simplified and feels less rigorous'***.
- In other schools, teachers described their reasons for actively resisting this apparent trend: *'There was a discussion a few years ago about squashing Key Stage 3 into two years. It was agreed that the core subjects could start the GCSE courses in Year 9 but I stood strongly against losing Year 9 history. **Squashing it into two years means losing both breadth and depth. I also think that most Year 8s are just not ready for the content of topics such as the Holocaust.'***

REFLECTION

It is instructive to note that in 1990, the original recommendation of the History Working Group for the first National Curriculum was that the Holocaust should be mandatory within Key Stage 4 rather than Key Stage 3. This advice was, however, abandoned when school history was made an optional subject only for students aged fourteen and beyond. The Holocaust and other Twentieth Century topics were moved downwards into the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure that they were covered at all. On one level this reflected governmental belief that all students must study the Holocaust but, as with the more recent trend that UCL research has uncovered, it also illustrates clearly that broader policy agendas can unwittingly override – and potentially undermine – considered pedagogical recommendations such as the optimal age for young people to study this history.

While it is also important to note early indications that concern and increased scrutiny from the Ofsted Inspectorate framework might ultimately prompt many schools and academy chains to consider reversing this trend, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education takes very seriously its responsibility to support teachers in their existing classroom experiences. As Programme Director Ruth-Anne Lenga reflects,

Although it is far from ideal for young people to be formally introduced to the Holocaust at a stage when many may just not be ready to grapple with its most challenging questions and emotional demands, the UCL Centre for Holocaust will do all it can to support teachers on the ground by adapting materials for age appropriateness and finding new ways to scaffold learning for younger students. At the same time we will continue to advocate for later teaching, in Year 9, wherever possible and for extended provision so that students can return to, expand and deepen their understanding of this important history in later years.

COMMENTARY FROM CENTRE STAFF

'Evidence of the increasing tendency to teach the Holocaust to students at a younger age in Key Stage 3 (e.g., 11-13 years old) history represents a worrying trend. For the vast majority of students Key Stage 3 is the last time that they will learn about this profoundly significant history at school. It is

essential therefore that they study the Holocaust at an age when they have the maturity and conceptual ability to understand how and why it happened and to consider its contemporary significance. To achieve these goals, students need to grasp demanding concepts such as antisemitism, racial ideology, totalitarianism, resistance and response, complicity and responsibility, mass murder and genocide, loss and survival. They must understand the Holocaust was not inevitable but rather evolved over time, and necessitated the active involvement of hundreds of thousands of Europeans. It is a complex and disturbing history which requires skilful and age-appropriate teaching. Typically, therefore, it is more suitable and educationally beneficial to teach the Holocaust at the upper end of the Key Stage 3 age range, than it is to teach it in Years 7 and 8.'

Professor Stuart Foster, Executive Director UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

'The real concern here is whether it is wise to teach the Holocaust to students as young as 12 and 13. Back in 2009 most teachers held off starting a unit on the Holocaust until the last half of the summer term of Year 9. This allowed students a chance to grow cognitively and emotionally before confronting them with an in-depth study of the Holocaust. It made perfect sense, after all this is traumatic history – full frontal, mass murder on an unprecedented and unimaginable scale. Teaching about the Holocaust needs to be handled with utmost care to ensure students wellbeing, but it also needs to tackle some of the most difficult and discomfiting realities of the human condition. Any teacher will tell you that a year in the life of a teenager makes a huge difference in terms of their life experience, resilience, emotional literacy, ability to empathise and to contemplate meaning. If we are going to present our students with an honest, accurate, and serious study of the Holocaust – which we must do – students need to be as ready as they can be.

The greatest casualty would be if teachers, in their attempt to 'protect' younger students from the emotional discomfort of this history, find themselves shielding them from its reality, sanitising the Holocaust in some way or focusing primarily on those exceptional 'positive' stories that can be told. This would do little to challenge the many worrying myths and misunderstandings we know persist. We need students to be able to fully engage with this history; they ought to have the right to learn about it when they are most ready.

Schools may well have good reason to teach the Holocaust to earlier year groups. I guess one could reasonably argue that learning from the Holocaust is so essential that the earlier students begin this study the better, but, by the same token, it is possibly the most excruciatingly difficult a subject a teacher will ever teach and the younger the students are in class, the more complicated and difficult this endeavour will undoubtedly be.'

Ruth-Anne Lenga, Associate Professor (Teaching) and Programme Director, UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

ACCOMPANYING FIGURES

Fig 1. Teaching about the Holocaust in secondary history – change by year group

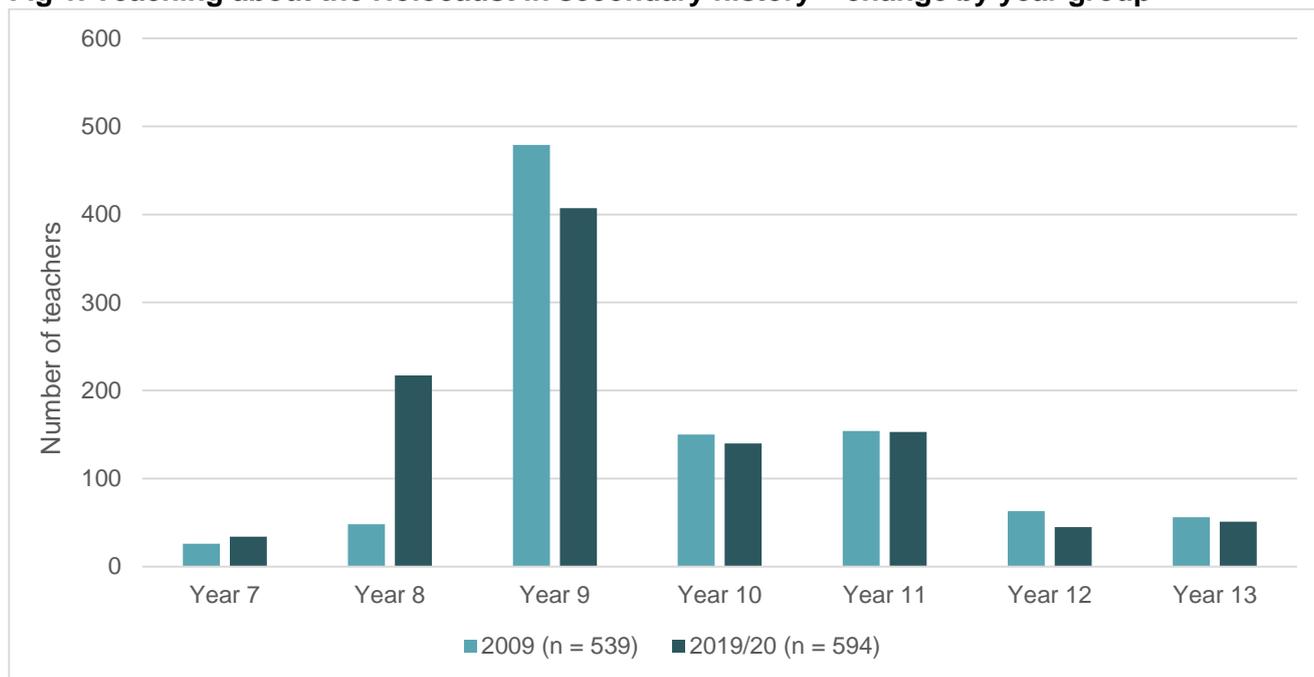


Fig 2. And Fig 3. Proportion of history teaching about the Holocaust by year group (2009 and 2019/20).

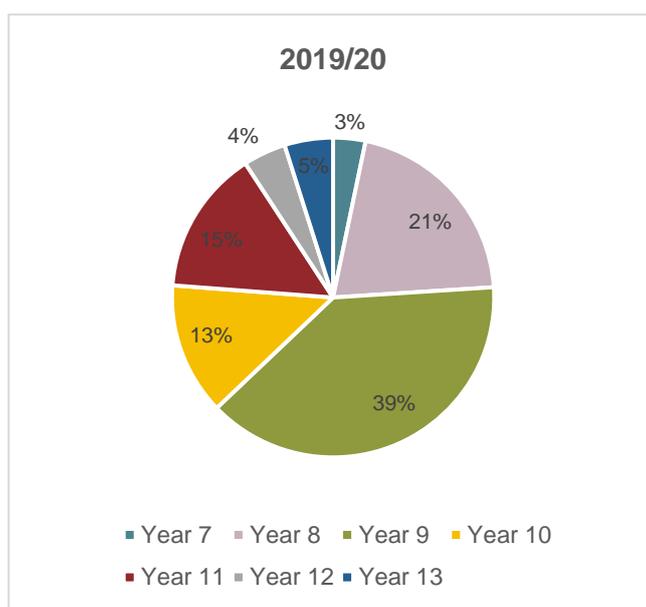
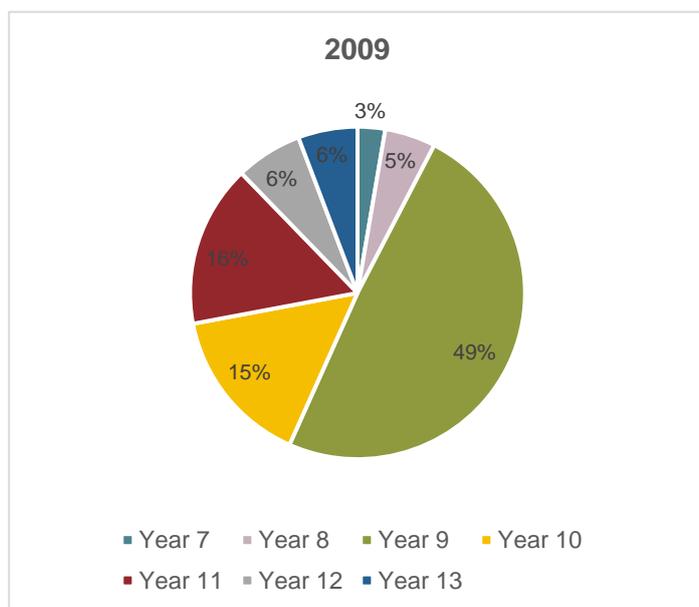


Fig 5. and Fig 6. Proportion of all teaching about the Holocaust by subject (2009 and 2019/20).

