Holocaust Education

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Published by University College London

Foster, Stuart, et al.
Holocaust Education: Contemporary challenges and controversies.
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Preface

Research that informed this book: Landmark studies with teachers and students

The chapters in this book were written by colleagues at the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education (CHE). All of the Centre’s educational programmes and courses are informed by academic scholarship, practical classroom experience and empirical research. Distinctively, however, the Centre is the only Holocaust education institution in the world which explicitly employs applied research to develop and improve classroom practice.

In service of its distinctive mission, the Centre has a small team of researchers who work closely with members of the Centre’s pedagogic team to ensure its work is research-informed and evidence led. The research is ongoing and systematic and for almost a decade has explored a wide range of issues and topics. Notwithstanding this body of important research and scholarship, the Centre’s programme is primarily informed by the results of two major national studies, published in 2009 and 2016 respectively. Throughout this book authors will consistently refer to these two landmark studies. This preface provides a brief overview of these two national studies and hopefully offers readers a point of reference as they explore the challenges and controversies identified by the authors.

The Centre’s first national study, *Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools*, was published in 2009 (Pettigrew et al. 2009). The Holocaust had been a mandated element of England’s National Curriculum for history since 1991, but very little was known about how the Holocaust was taught in schools during the previous two decades. The research, therefore, sought to address this significant gap in understanding and, on the basis of the findings, to offer ways to improve teaching in learning. Thus, the 2009 research had two important aims. First, to examine when, where, how and why the Holocaust was taught in state-maintained secondary schools in England. Second, to inform the design and delivery of a continuing professional development (CPD)
programme for teachers who taught about the Holocaust. Essentially, therefore, the research provided the catalyst for the original development of an educational programme for teachers which later became the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

The research was both the first of its kind to be produced in England and the largest in terms of scope and scale. It employed a two-phase mixed methodology. The first phase was based on responses to a detailed online survey (comprising 54 sections) completed by 2,108 teachers. The second phase focused on follow-up interviews with 68 teachers in 24 different schools across England. In overview, the 132-page research report provided a more comprehensive empirical portrait of Holocaust education in England’s secondary schools than had ever existed before. The research exposed a number of key concerns and challenges and in many respects served as a call to action in the quest to improve Holocaust education.

Whereas the 2009 study primarily focused on the perspectives and practice of teachers who taught about the Holocaust, the 2016 study explicitly focused on students. The landmark 2016 publication, *What Do Students Know and Understand About the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools* (Foster et al. 2016), was the result of an intensive three-year study. The first aim of the research was to provide a detailed national portrait of students’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. It also explored students’ attitudes to this history and their encounters with it, both in and outside school. The second aim was to establish an empirical basis from which considerations of the most effective ways to improve teaching and learning about the Holocaust could be made.

The 2016 research also adopted a two-phased mixed methodology. The first phase was underpinned by responses to a detailed online survey (comprising 91 sections) completed by 7,952 students. The second phase featured focus-group interviews with 244 students in schools across England. Participating students came from all years of state-maintained secondary schools in England (i.e. 11–18-year-olds). In total, including those who had participated in pilot studies, more than 9,500 students contributed to the research. It represented the world’s largest ever study of its kind in terms of scope and scale.

In particular, the study identified significant gaps in students’ knowledge and limitations in their understandings of the Holocaust. It also
evidenced the existence of common myths and misconceptions among many young people about the causes, conduct and consequences of the Holocaust. Accordingly, the findings of the 2016 study offer many challenges and issues for those working in the field of Holocaust education. As a result of the chapters in this book and the research that underpins them, it is hoped that readers will acquire a greater sense of the challenges and controversies that exist and, most importantly, consider how they can be effectively addressed and overcome.

Throughout the book, we refer to these research projects as the ‘IOE teacher study’ (Pettigrew et al. 2009) and the ‘UCL student study’ (Foster et al. 2016) or with similar identifying words.

**Acknowledgements**

The research in which the essays contained in this volume are grounded was made possible by the funding of the Department for Education and Pears Foundation. The editors and contributors gratefully acknowledge the continued support of these funders.