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Look before you leap: Teaching about the Holocaust in primary schools

Eleni Karayianni

Introduction

In England, there is currently no requirement to teach about the Holocaust in the primary school. Despite this, evidence exists to suggest primary schools are including the Holocaust in their curriculum. As the UCL student study (Foster et al. 2016) reported, 28.5 per cent of almost 8,000 student participants said they first encountered the Holocaust in primary school. The survey responses of this study, along with desk-based research focused on online information of Holocaust Education organisations’ programmes and resources, and primary schools’ curriculum plans, indicate that these encounters are taking many forms. For example, some schools choose to mark Holocaust Memorial Day with assemblies and survivor testimonies, others read the book or watch the film The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, or encounter Anne Frank’s Diary, and some primary school pupils learn about Kindertransport as part of a study of the Second World War. The growing body of academic and practitioner literature, as well as the increasing availability of resources, guides, teacher training and museum education programmes specifically aimed at primary school children, indicate the emergence of an educational trend or, perhaps, a drive from certain invested parties to increase the Holocaust’s presence in the primary curriculum.

Whether a trend or drive, this development raises a number of critical issues. The most important is the stark absence of research upon
which to make informed decisions about the appropriateness of the subject for primary aged pupils. This includes consideration of the content that such teaching could include, the objectives it could pursue and the potential impact on pupils’ cognitive, emotional, or moral development. Indeed, much advocacy for such teaching from academics, educators, and Holocaust education institutions is largely based on assumptions and perceptions of benefits for pupils’ attitudes and values rather than on robust empirical evidence. This chapter argues that advocating for, or implementing teaching about, such an important and difficult topic as the Holocaust should go hand in hand with careful consideration of the rationale for such an inclusion, and empirical explorations of the ways context, content and pedagogies can impact pupils. Overall, this chapter argues for a more thoughtful approach to the teaching of the Holocaust in the primary school. It aims to add to the limited existing body of literature on primary school pupils’ encounters with the Holocaust and to challenge common assumptions made about the benefits of Holocaust education for the development of positive attitudes and values in young people.

The analysis is based on a sub-sample of the existing database produced for the UCL student study described in detail elsewhere in this collection (Foster et al. 2016). Analysis of this database focused on a specific section of the study and explored whether or not learning about the Holocaust in the primary school is related to students’ attitudes towards immigrants and their attitudes towards neighbourhood diversity. As such, the analysis problematises the assumptions commonly made about the value of Holocaust education in countering prejudice, discrimination and racism and calls for more empirical research on the objectives, delivery and outcomes of Holocaust inclusion in the primary curriculum.

The findings of this analysis and the questions it raises have important implications not only for primary and secondary school teachers, but also for academics, policy makers and Holocaust education organisations nationally and internationally. A recent investigation carried out by UNESCO and the Georg Eckert Institute indicated that the Holocaust is currently included in the curricula of more than half of the 135 countries investigated across all continents (Carrier et al. 2015). Thus, the present analysis contributes to discussions about when, how and why to teach about the Holocaust which are of international significance and interest.
Holocaust education in the primary school

In England, the Holocaust is currently a compulsory subject for Key Stage 3 History and is usually taught to Year 9 students (13–14-year-olds) (Pettigrew et al. 2009). Teachers at primary level are not required to teach the subject, and as Hale (2018, 222) stated:

There remain too few empirical studies in the field, contributing to a myriad of unknowns including: the extent that the Holocaust is part of primary school curriculum; how the topic is approached; the knowledge on non-history specialist primary teachers delivering the subject; the impact that learning about the Holocaust has on children (including their emotional, attitudinal and cognitive responses); and consequently, if and/or how it should be taught to children of this age.

This latter issue of whether or not the Holocaust is an age-appropriate subject to teach at primary school level is one that has been fiercely contested. Those who are against the teaching of the Holocaust in primary schools have cited a number of different arguments. Heyl (in Mittnik 2018) claims that early exposure to the topic would overwhelm children both cognitively and emotionally with the danger of traumatising them. Totten (1999) has argued that the history is too horrific for lower primary aged pupils and so complex that any attempt to teach it at this level will result in simplifications that distort the history beyond recognition.2 Short (2003), while claiming that some of Totten’s criticisms were misdirected, nevertheless argued that fatigue, reactance and primary pupils’ lack of understanding of Jewish identity and culture strengthen the case for not including the Holocaust in the primary curriculum. According to Short (2003), fatigue may result from too much exposure to the topic when students, who having learned about the Holocaust in primary school, encounter it again in secondary school (and perhaps not just in history lessons but in other subjects too). Furthermore, Short (2003) uses Brehm’s psychological notion of ‘reactance’ to describe the feeling of manipulation that pupils may experience because of pressure to recognise the importance of the Holocaust and to learn its lessons.

On the other hand, those advocating the inclusion of Holocaust education in primary schools argue that pupils in the upper primary level
are ‘intellectually and emotionally ready to explore complex and challenging histories’ (Holocaust Educational Trust 2016, 3) and can manage the difficult content of the Holocaust (Supple 1998). Others have claimed that the primary school is a good place to do some foundation work as it offers vast cross-curricular, multi-disciplinary opportunities, and more continuity as primary teachers have the flexibility to respond to pupils’ responses instantly or follow up their lessons the next day (Maitles and Cowan 1999). Yet others have cited pupils’ familiarity with the subject – through the media and society – as reason to deal with the subject in the safe and controlled environment of the school (Richler-Friedman 2018; see also Mittnik 2018).

Of crucial importance for the discussion in this chapter is that the appropriateness of the topic has been linked by advocates for its inclusion in the primary curriculum with what they see as the positive outcomes of such an encounter. They claim that studying this subject is not only appropriate but also essential and worthwhile because it can help develop pupils’ understanding of racism, injustice, prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination, and can develop the positive values of empathy, tolerance and respect for others (Collin 2000; Cowan 2018; Cowan and Maitles 2007; Jennings 2010; Maitles and Cowan 1999; Sepinwall 1999; Szejnmann et al. 2018).

The civic and moral development of young people has been a large part of the justification for Holocaust education not only at primary but also the secondary level. Beyond historical knowledge, as Clements (2007) claims, moral and social education objectives such as countering racism and encouraging active citizenship have provided the rationale for the inclusion of the Holocaust in the National Curriculum since its inception. Furthermore, the aim of establishing the Holocaust Memorial Day in 2001 was clearly explained by the Home Office as an opportunity for a national focus on education which will promote ‘a democratic and tolerant society, free of the evils of prejudice and racism’ (Home Office 1999). These civic aims do not simply express politicians’ and policy makers’ hopes and aspirations for Holocaust education. Empirical evidence suggests that they are also central to the aims and practices of many teachers. For example, the IOE teacher study revealed that secondary teachers mainly prioritise civic-based objectives over subject-specific ones (Pettigrew et al. 2009). Specifically, a total of 71 per cent of survey respondents in a sample of 2,108 secondary teachers said they taught about the Holocaust ‘to develop an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping in any society’ and 55.9 per cent said they aimed for their students ‘to learn the lessons of the
Holocaust and to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again’ (Pettigrew et al. 2009, 76).

Whether or not the teaching of the Holocaust has been successful in contributing to students’ citizenship and values, education at the secondary level is a matter still to be determined as very few empirical studies have examined the issue (see for example Brown and Davies 1998; Carrington and Short 1997; Clements 2007). Research in Holocaust education in primary schools is even scarcer. A comprehensive literature review of studies published in the English language revealed only a handful of empirical studies examining what teachers at this level teach or what pupils learn. In the United States, Schweber’s (2008) research into one third grade classroom (children aged 8–9) led her to conclude that pupils at that age should not be learning about the Holocaust because they either fail to understand it, or because they do understand but are horrified by it. Jennings’s (2010) study into a fifth grade classroom (children aged 10–11), on the other hand, concluded that Holocaust education has exciting possibilities for critical citizenship if teachers make a long-term engagement and build a layered curriculum. In Scotland, Maitles and Cowan (1999) interviewed eight primary school teachers about their inclusion of the Holocaust in their lessons and examined the methods and content used. Later, Cowan and Maitles (2002) explored the practices of primary schools in one local authority and concluded that after the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day, the presence and quality of Holocaust education in primary schools had increased with evidence of positive effects on pupils (see also Cowan and Maitles 2010). The same researchers conducted a small-scale longitudinal study into the immediate and lasting effects of Holocaust education on primary pupils. They concluded that learning about the Holocaust in the primary school has positive effects on pupils’ values and attitudes (Cowan and Maitles 2005; Cowan and Maitles 2007; Maitles 2008). In England, the work of Short and Carrington (Short 1991; Short 2003; Short and Carrington 1995) is notable but it does not focus on the Holocaust directly; rather their research has examined primary pupils’ understanding of Jewish culture and identity and concluded that teachers need to first address possible stereotypes or misconceptions pupils have about the Jews if Holocaust education is to be meaningful and have the desired outcomes in the future.

The studies described here offer interesting and important findings but are not sufficient to create a rich empirical framework in which meaningful considerations of if and what is appropriate can take place. Indeed, it is starkly apparent that current practices in schools (and among Holocaust
education institutions) and their impact on pupils are under-researched and typically based more on assumptions rather than empirical evidence. Educators and institutions have claimed that the subject is or is not appropriate for primary school pupils in intellectual or emotional terms, but there are to date very limited – in number and methodology – studies that examine and assess the actual impact of studying the Holocaust on primary pupils. Furthermore, it seems that much advocacy and practice has been based on the assumption that including the Holocaust in the primary school can help achieve civic and moral goals, but again empirical evidence has not been forthcoming. The chapter now moves to further problematise these assumptions by examining a sub-sample of the database of the UCL student study. In doing so, it aims to open up discussions about the purpose, place and function of Holocaust education in the primary school and to make suggestions for future directions.

**Researching students’ civic attitudes**

The analysis presented here is based on the data collected by the UCL student study on knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust. For the purposes of this analysis, I used a small sub-sample of this study: the Year 7 students (aged 11–12) who completed the survey. Specific cases were further selected from this sub-sample and were divided into two groups: Group A consisted of those Year 7 students who said they had studied the Holocaust in primary school but not yet in secondary school (n = 243; 131 girls, 112 boys), and Group B consisted of those who said they had never studied the Holocaust in any school environment (n = 410; 233 girls, 177 boys). I compared the two groups’ answers to the *Attitudes Towards Equal Rights for Immigrants* scale (Schulz et al. 2010) along with their answers to the *Attitudes Towards Neighbourhood Diversity* scale (Schulz et al. 2011). The two scales were taken from the 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), which is the largest international study on civic and citizenship education ever conducted. The discussion of the findings into students’ attitudes is supplemented by examples of students’ answers to knowledge questions as such a connection is deemed useful. It should be emphasised that because this is not a longitudinal study, and as the survey did not ask for details about students’ learning experiences, we cannot determine cause and effect relationships. However, it was believed that comparing the two groups could provide some insight into the presence or absence of potential
links between studying the Holocaust in primary school and students’ attitudes or values.

Attitudes towards equal rights for immigrants

In the UCL student study, the *Attitudes Towards Equal Rights for Immigrants* scale was introduced to participants with the following information: ‘People sometimes move from one country to another, and are often known as “immigrants”’. Students were then presented with a list of statements about immigrants and asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each item, using a four-point Likert scale in which 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ and 4 = ‘strongly agree’.

Figure 5.1 shows the proportion of Year 7 students giving each response on the items of this scale. The responses of those who learned
about the Holocaust in primary school (Group A) are compared with those who have never learned about the Holocaust in school (Group B). Overall, the majority of students in both groups either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, suggesting positive attitudes towards rights for immigrants. Importantly, the results indicated remarkably similar attitudes towards immigrants between those students who had studied the Holocaust in the primary school and those who had never studied the Holocaust in any school setting.

Each question was scored from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 4 indicated strong agreement. Thus, mean total scores on this scale could range from 5 to 20, with higher scores showing more accepting attitudes towards equal rights for immigrants. For those who learned about the Holocaust in primary school, the mean score was 16.37 (with standard deviation = 2.66) and for those who had never learned about the Holocaust in a school environment, the mean score was 16.17 (with standard deviation = 3.06). The means were compared using an unrelated t-test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups' attitudes. The result indicated no significant difference between the attitudes of students in the two groups (t = .83, DF = 624, two tailed p = .41). In simple terms, the analysis of students' answers in this scale indicated that attitudes towards immigrants’ rights were the same between students who had studied the Holocaust in the primary school and students who had never learned about it in a school setting.

Attitudes towards neighbourhood diversity

The Attitudes Towards Neighbourhood Diversity scale was introduced with the question ‘How would you feel about having neighbours belonging to the following groups?’ and then presented students with a list of nine different groups of people (‘people of a different nationality than yours’; ‘people of a different religion than yours’; ‘people of a different skin colour than yours’; ‘people of a different social class than yours’; ‘homosexuals (gay men and/or lesbians)’; ‘people who come from another part of the country’; ‘people with mental health problems’; and ‘people with HIV/AIDS’). The question asked students to state whether they ‘wouldn’t mind’ or they ‘would dislike’ having each of these groups as their neighbours.

Total scores on this scale were calculated by how many groups the students would not like to live next to. Scores could range from 0 to 8,
with higher scores showing more groups that students did not want to live next to, so higher intolerance to neighbourhood diversity. For those that learned about the Holocaust in primary school, the mean score was 0.92 (standard deviation = 1.21) and for those who had never learned about the Holocaust in a school environment, their mean score was 1.32 (standard deviation = 1.5). An unrelated t-test performed on the data showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups: (t = -3.45, DF = 603, two tailed p < .01). However, we should remember that we are comparing means with very little real difference between them (0.92 and 1.32 where it is possible for these values to have ranged from 0 to 8). So, to explore the effect size, Cohen’s $d$ was calculated and showed a small effect ($d = 0.29$), meaning that the difference between the two groups is minor, even if it’s statistically significant. In other words, while there was a difference between the two groups, it was very small, and consequently we should be cautious about overstating this difference. In general, there was a very high level of acceptance of neighbourhood diversity in both groups.

The results indicate that students seem to leave the primary school and enter secondary school with very positive attitudes towards immigrants as well as towards people of difference or minority groups. The data could be used to claim that primary school teachers appear to be doing a good job in teaching students about racism, human rights, diversity, tolerance and respect whether they teach about the Holocaust or not. Or the data could be an indication of positive values additionally learned outside school, from students’ family and social environment. Of course, we should also exercise caution as students can be very aware of what answer is acceptable during surveys like this one and thus the percentages may be artificially high due to students’ understanding of what answers are more socially desirable. While that may be true to some extent, we have no reason to doubt that there are negligible differences in attitudes towards others between the two groups. In fact, other studies have had similar results. For example, Maitles et al. (2006) compared secondary students who had learned about the Holocaust in primary school with peers who hadn’t. While there was some evidence that might suggest differences in voting attitudes and perceived knowledge, they found negligible differences between the two groups to the questions ‘I think that it is OK for children to make racist comments about Jews/Blacks/Chinese/Asians/Gypsy Travellers/refugees’ and ‘I think there are too many Jews/Blacks/Chinese/Asians/refugees in Scotland’ as both groups strongly disagreed with all these statements.
The findings from the analysis of these attitudinal scales clearly pose questions regarding the purpose of Holocaust education in the primary school. The data do not seem to justify assumptions regarding the benefits of studying the Holocaust for the promotion of civic and moral objectives as the study of the Holocaust in primary school does not seem to have added value on these students’ attitudes and values. In fact, the findings presented here stand in contrast to a study conducted by Cowan and Maitles (2002; 2005; 2007) who have claimed positive effects on primary pupils after studying the Holocaust (see also Maitles 2008; Maitles et al. 2006). Above all, it points to the need for more research on this issue and the need for quantitative and qualitative research to clearly define and capture the moral or attitudinal effect of Holocaust education on primary pupils.

Knowledge about the Holocaust

The possibility of developing positive attitudes towards others or informing young people’s moral development through the study of the Holocaust cannot be considered without due attention to the history of the Holocaust. In other words, without historical knowledge about the Holocaust – of what the Holocaust was and, most importantly, why it happened – we cannot acquire lessons from the Holocaust; we cannot reach ethical judgements and cannot draw moral or attitudinal lessons of contemporary significance. To illustrate and substantiate this point, the discussion now turns attention to evidence of students’ historical understanding from the same UCL student study.

First, when these Year 7 students were asked during the survey to indicate whether they knew the meaning of ‘antisemitism’, only 16 per cent of those who had studied the Holocaust in primary school recognised the term. Compared to 7.3 per cent of those who knew the term without ever studying the Holocaust in school, this is not an impressive result. Of course, not knowing the term does not necessarily mean that students don’t know its meaning. However, it is not unreasonable to expect that the term should be explicitly mentioned when studying the Holocaust. A possible explanation of this finding is that the Holocaust is taught in primary schools as part of broader lessons about racism in general rather than antisemitism in particular. The studies of Dawidowicz (1992) and Short (2005) on how the Holocaust was taught in secondary schools support this argument. They provided evidence that the specificity of antisemitism was often lost because the Holocaust was taught only in terms
of racism and prejudice. Certainly, when students in the UCL student study were asked about ‘racism’, 90.7 per cent of those who had studied the Holocaust recognised the term compared to 74.4 per cent of those who never studied the Holocaust. But, an essential question remains: if students learned about the Holocaust without reference to antisemitism, how are they to begin to understand why it happened? As Dawidowicz (1992) argues: ‘the trouble with this kind of universalization is that it . . . ignores the particular religious and historical roots that nurture specific prejudices’ (Dawidowicz 1992, 74). And so, if antisemitism is not explicitly addressed in the classroom, are students to understand that Jews were persecuted just because they were different? As Short remarked:

If that were the case, one has to ask why others who were in some sense ‘different’ such as the red-haired, the seriously overweight and the sporting elite did not have to endure the same fate. The reality, of course, is that the Jews were singled out because they were held responsible for Germany losing the war; they were seen as exercising a malign influence over the economy and were suspected of harbouring communist sympathies. That said, their persecution cannot be explained adequately without also taking account of the less immediate but nonetheless potent influence of the long tradition in Germany (and elsewhere in Europe) of Christian anti-Semitism.

(Short 2003, 121)

Alongside Short, the argument that I intend to make here is that lessons which present the Holocaust as a generalised paradigm of the evils of racism or prejudice and the virtues of respect for others do very little to promote real understanding of the actual processes of stereotyping and scapegoating.

Furthermore, if students don’t understand antisemitism and why the Jews were persecuted, what stops them from blaming the victims? Certainly, during interviews with secondary students, Foster et al. (2016) found a tendency on behalf of some students of all ages to answer the question ‘why the Jews?’ by providing distorted understandings and misconceptions about who the Jewish people were. For example, students referred to Jews as having better jobs, better education and more money than ordinary Germans. In addition, Short (1991; 2015) has argued that children’s natural inclination to believe in a just world can lead them to think that if Jews suffered they must have done something to deserve it. This raises an important pedagogical concern as students are unlikely to respond appropriately when learning about the Holocaust if they don’t
come to see the Jewish people as innocent people, undeserving of their fate (Short 1991; Short 2015).

During the survey, students indicated a lack of understanding of who the Jewish people were on a number of occasions. For example, when asked about the size of the Jewish population in pre-war Germany, only 7 per cent of those Year 7s who had studied the Holocaust in primary school gave the correct answer (that ‘less than 1%’ were Jewish) in a multiple choice question. Just over a third of these students (34.7 per cent) thought that Jewish people accounted for ‘approximately 15%’ of the German population in 1933 and 39.3 per cent estimated the proportion of Jewish population at ‘more than 30%’. Students’ responses to this question raise concerns about what they have learned and how that knowledge may relate to the formation of attitudes. For, how are students expected to draw lessons about the dangers of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, if they don’t come to recognise the myths and negative stereotypes about Jews that ‘are woven into the very fabric of western culture’ (Short 1991, 29) and they don’t come to see the persecuted Jews as a small minority in German society? Furthermore, if Nazi propaganda claiming that Jews were a dominant group in Germany is not addressed when teaching about the Holocaust, how are students to even begin to understand their social duties and responsibilities towards others and especially towards the weaker members of their society?

A further research finding warrants careful consideration here. When during the survey those Year 7 students who had learned about the Holocaust in the primary school were asked who they thought was responsible for the genocide, out of 235 open-text responses received, the most common answer by a vast majority was ‘Adolf Hitler’. A total of 143 students assigned responsibility to Hitler alone. A small number of students followed this by explaining that ‘he was a bad man’, ‘he was a really terrible man’, and ‘he hated Jews’. An additional 45 students blamed Hitler along with the Nazis or the Nazi party and 19 students blamed the Nazi party without reference to Hitler. Only 21 students extended responsibility beyond Hitler and/or the Nazis. A dozen added the Germans as responsible along with Hitler and an additional eight students said the Germans were responsible without reference to Hitler. One student held ‘the SS, Hitler, Heinrich, Himmler, the Nazis and all the soldiers who obeyed these orders’ responsible. One additional student said that Hitler was to blame ‘along with people who agreed with him’ and, remarkably, only one student out of 235 who had studied the Holocaust in the primary school and replied to this question, explicitly extended responsibility beyond
Germany by holding accountable ‘Adolf Hitler and his soldiers and all the other participating countries in Europe’.

Thus, the research revealed a significant Hitler-centrism (see Stuart Foster’s chapter in this volume). This is not a surprising finding as students commonly see Hitler as the ‘evil’, ‘mad’ individual who caused the Holocaust to happen (Carrington and Short 1997; Foster et al. 2016; Mathis 2018; Mittnik 2016, 2018). However, it is a finding that raises questions about the purpose of teaching the Holocaust at the primary level. If students see the Holocaust as the result of one isolated ‘bad man’, how are they expected to understand that suppressing and discriminating against minority groups is embedded within society at large? How are they to comprehend notions of prejudice and discrimination, culpability and complicity, and how are they to take social action or learn to stand up to injustice if they don’t understand how to recognise it?

One could counteract these arguments by saying that we simply cannot expect primary school pupils to acquire such historical knowledge and understanding about Europe-wide collaboration and complicity but that they are still capable of taking away civic or moral lessons. However, what this discussion has emphasised is that, without sound historical knowledge, pupils may not be able to truly achieve any kind of citizenship, personal, social, or values-based educational objectives. They may not be able to move beyond superficial slogans about respect and equal rights (or perhaps beyond merely ticking the socially desirable answer on a survey) to true, deep understandings of social phenomena. Thus, they may not truly learn the ‘lessons’ of the Holocaust. Fundamentally, if we really think pupils are not ready to understand the history of the Holocaust, why then teach about it at this age?

**Implications for future directions**

The purpose of this chapter is not to proclaim the work of primary school teachers as ineffective in cognitive, attitudinal or moral terms. We certainly know nothing about the way the students in the sample were taught about the Holocaust, with what resources or pedagogical approaches and in pursuit of what objectives. However, the data presented here suggest no – or very little – difference in attitudes related to immigrants and neighbourhood diversity between those who had and those who hadn’t learned about the Holocaust in the primary school. Students’ answers to knowledge questions further suggest that they hold misconceptions and inaccuracies that could actively inhibit the development of the envisaged attitudes and
values. These findings, therefore, raise important questions about the purpose and value of including the Holocaust in the primary curriculum.

They suggest that an encounter with the Holocaust in the primary school will not automatically inform or improve pupils’ attitudes towards others. If pupils learn about the persecution of Jewish people during the Second World War, about *Kindertransport* or about Anne Frank, they will not automatically become more sympathetic towards immigrants or people different than themselves. Short (2005) – conducting research with secondary school students after they had participated in Holocaust Memorial Day activities – concluded that they failed to learn a number of important lessons from the Holocaust. This prompted him to state that students cannot be relied on to work lessons out for themselves but that such learning requires explicit focus. If this is the case for secondary school students, it can only be at least equally the case for younger pupils. What the present analysis does then is challenge those who argue that civic and moral development is the reason for including the Holocaust in the primary school curriculum or who assume that all encounters with the subject will benefit pupils in matters of contemporary significance.

Thus, this analysis points to the need to reconceptualise what we think Holocaust education can offer primary school pupils. In simple terms, it is crucial to step back and consider why we may want to include the Holocaust in the primary curriculum. Why the Holocaust specifically? Indeed, it is possible that the important civic and moral aims of anti-racist education, prejudice reduction, empathy, tolerance, and respect for others can be pursued by other means, other topics and subjects. As Heyl (in Mathis 2018) has argued, objectives such as tolerance and open-mindedness do not require discussion of the Holocaust. This is not by any means to deny the significance of the Holocaust as a subject and its potential for students’ ethical and civic development. Rather it is to question the potential for in-depth study and meaning making of such a complex subject by primary aged pupils. The data certainly indicate that teachers who do not teach about the Holocaust are effective at developing positive attitudes in their pupils anyway. And perhaps teachers in both cases are only one of the many influential factors in pupils’ learning which seem to be having positive effects on their values and attitudes. So why the Holocaust? What do we think the Holocaust has to offer to our young people that would justify its inclusion in the primary curriculum when it is already a part of the secondary curriculum? It is of course beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt to answer this question. But it is very important to ask it.
As Mathis (2018) claims, the question of if the topic should be taught at primary school needs to be answered first before we start thinking about how to teach it. When practitioners, academics and researchers have articulated their own response to this question, then we may be closer to a more clearly conceptualised purpose for Holocaust education in primary schools. In doing so, we need to take into account concerns such as those expressed by Short (2003) about the legitimacy of certain lessons (regarding tolerance and respect for others) and the ways in which such lessons fundamentally misrepresent the genocide and can create misunderstandings about it. The issue of creating misconceptions and misunderstandings in pursuit of civic aims or in the process of simplifying or generalising the content is a particularly salient one that deserves careful consideration. The concerns about trivialisation (didactic reduction as, for example, when dealing with the topic without referring to mass murder), instrumentalisation and exploitation (using the topic to teach general ethical principles) (Heyl in Mittnik, 2018; Heyl in Mathis, 2018) of the Holocaust need to be addressed.

After contemplation on purpose and objectives, serious attention needs to be given to how the intended educational objectives can be realised and assessed, with what content, what approach and what resources. As Hale clearly stated: ‘for educators and academics who advocate the introduction of this topic to primary school curricula, thoughtful and critical consideration is needed to determine what should or could be expected from children of this age’ (Hale 2018, 235). To this end, educators need to draw perspectives from a myriad of related fields and bodies of knowledge.

The entire process of designing and implementing Holocaust programmes needs to be grounded in research so that anticipated and desired outcomes are tested, methods revised and practice improved. In this sense, we need not only better informed, richer theoretical discussions on what the purpose of the Holocaust in the primary school could be, we also need to ground these discussions in rich empirical research. As has been illustrated here, analyses such as the one presented in this chapter and in the work of Cowan and Maitles (Cowan and Maitles, 2002; 2005; 2007; Maitles, 2008; Maitles et al. 2006) that examine the impact on attitudes in quantitative terms without first looking at what specific content pupils have been taught, why, how and for how long, are of little use in progressing our understanding of how the topic impacts pupils in attitudinal, emotional or cognitive ways.
An urgent need exists for empirical studies exploring what current practice actually looks like in England’s primary classrooms to determine how common it is for primary schools to teach the Holocaust, what the teaching includes, why teachers choose to teach it and what they are aiming to achieve. We need qualitative research that looks at the educational processes more closely and assesses both teacher interventions and pupil outcomes. If we want to determine the impact on civic and moral development, we also need research studies that can establish links between Holocaust education and attitudes or values. Then, and if we decide that part of our purpose for including the Holocaust is to inform civic and moral development, we need to explore not only what kind of educational interventions are more effective, but also what kind of quantitative and qualitative research methods can more accurately measure pupils’ attitudes, worldviews and values.

Conclusion

The place of the Holocaust in the primary school is an issue that has increasingly attracted the interest of Holocaust education institutions and academics in recent years. Despite this interest, we currently know too little about whether and to what degree primary school teachers include it in their curricula, for what purpose and with what content and approach they teach it. The analysis presented in this chapter aimed to problematise the purpose of including the Holocaust in the primary curriculum and to highlight a number of potential problems when dealing with its content. In an Attitudes Towards Equal Rights for Immigrants scale, it has illustrated no significant difference between those Year 7 students who had learned about the Holocaust in primary school and those who had never learned about it in a school setting. With regards to questions about attitudes towards neighbourhood diversity, it has illustrated very small differences in attitudes towards others between the two groups. The findings relating to students’ knowledge about the Holocaust further indicated that advocated lessons relating to civic and moral development are not straightforward and that generalising or simplifying the history of the Holocaust potentially does very little towards achieving such goals. The chapter concludes by calling for more research to inform our understanding of current practice and provide assessment on its impact on pupils. Undoubtedly more empirical evidence is needed to inform theoretical discussions on the purpose and value of Holocaust education in the primary school.
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Notes

1. Such as the National Holocaust Centre and Museum, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust, and the Jewish Museum.
2. Totten was replying to Sepinwall (1999) and objecting to the teaching of the Holocaust below the age of 10.
3. The Attitudes Towards Neighbourhood Diversity scale was used with the Latin American sample, not the European sample (Schulz et al. 2011).
4. The ICCS was carried out by an independent, international cooperative of national research agencies; the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).
5. A similar lack of knowledge of what ‘antisemitism’ means was found by Maitles et al. (2006).

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