

Holocaust Education – the History curriculum and the antiracist curriculum

Fiona Ranson

The Holocaust has been a compulsory area of study in the History curriculum since 1991. Russell (2006) argues that from the start, the rationale for its inclusion emphasised antiracism, rather than grounding it in History as a subject. A rationale driven by concern for social justice is shared by many Holocaust educators (IOE, 2009), and a whole range of government funded Holocaust Education organisations which support schools. And it is this concern which has impelled survivors to share their stories in schools:

...the promise I made to God all those years ago in the camps: if I survived, I would tell the world of the evil of the Nazis so no further generation could repeat the mistake...warning of the evils of racism. (Greenman, 2003:132)

The Holocaust was driven by racist ideology. As Bauer observes, Nazism targeted all Jews and ‘the motivation was ideological. The racist antisemitic ideology was the rational outcome of an irrational approach...with a minimal relation to reality’ (Bauer, 2002:266). Gregory notes that : ‘The racism that was so chronic a feature of the Nazi mentality showed itself in the policies adopted towards Czechs, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians’ (2000:43). Commenting on the Nazis’ meeting in Nuremberg, Hirshfeld was clear that they ‘were almost exclusively interested in uttering views upon race’ (1938:261).

This article argues that Holocaust education can and should have both historical and antiracist aims, that these aims do not conflict, nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, they have a role in supporting each other.

The role and form of history teaching is disputed: One view sees it as imparting historical facts and knowledge, grounded in a

chronology. A second view sees history as being about enquiry: evidence is collected and examined; audience and purpose are explored before the validity of the evidence can be determined (Arnold, 2000; Haydn, Arthur, Hunt, 2001; Russell, 2006). In this approach, different perspectives are explored and contradictory accounts considered. The National Curriculum takes a middle road between the two views.

It might be expected that a National Curriculum which identifies the Holocaust as a compulsory area and expects teaching to reflect a secure knowledge base with chronological awareness and development of historical skills, would offer clarity about the aims of Holocaust education. Is it this lack of prescription, asks Russell (2006), that has led to confusion over the aims of Holocaust education?

Research (IOE, 2009) shows that in many schools, Holocaust education is being undertaken in curriculum areas such as Religious Education or Citizenship and a ‘light touch’ approach is found in some History departments. The research also found evidence of a lack of clarity and consistency in the aims for teaching the Holocaust.

The validity of ‘values’ education, including antiracist education, is often disputed. Salmon (2003) cites Kinloch’s and Novick’s argument that the Holocaust ought to be taught as any other historical subject and be free of values education. They question how or even whether the Holocaust can teach us lessons from the past, maintaining that the only lesson that can be learnt is that ‘generally speaking, it is undesirable to kill large numbers of people, for any reason whatsoever’ (Kinloch, cited in Salmon, 2003:2). These opponents of antiracist rationale maintain that it is impossible to make connections between the racism of the past and

contemporary racism, arguing that applying 'hindsight' makes this approach invalid.

However, using Holocaust education as a vehicle for discussing racism and attitudes need not mean that we lose sight of historical context, nor that we discount hindsight. As Claire argues, history can provide students with genuine dilemmas or problems to solve 'to grapple with choices in imperfect contexts' (Claire 2005:96). This approach may be hypothetical but it allows for the development of critical thinking. Earlier (Claire, 1996), she argued that engaging in this type of thinking allows young people to develop attitudinal code, to examine contemporary issues from a 'safe' historical distance and to develop historical skills of enquiry which can later be applied to a contemporary context. Critical thinking skills are mutual aims of antiracist teaching and history teaching both.

It is sometimes questioned whether young people are able to make the connections across the decades or whether teachers are making connections for them and whether these are cognitively 'age appropriate'. Young people have a view of the world, including the Holocaust, which may be full of disconnected facts and misconceptions as well as unshared expertise, asserts Haydn (2000). In order to access the curriculum, young people need to incorporate new concepts into existing schemata (Donovan and Bransford, 2004). If we decide that history ought to be devoid of such connections, we are in danger of allowing misconceptions to remain unchallenged, or denying access to the curriculum by building on existing schemata.

The view that young people are unable to make connections of this kind appears to be based upon Piagetian theories of child development and fails to acknowledge recent research by neuroscientists which examines the teenage brain and shows that it undergoes reconfiguration (Strauch, 2003). Strauch cites the work of Benes, who discovered growth in an area called the myelin during teenage years. Myelination connects the two areas of the brain; new memories and emotions become 'an integral part of a circuit that connects quick reactions, to historical, contextual thought' (Strauch, 2003:54). This research suggests that

the teenage years are precisely the time we should be developing the wider educational aims of value education, including antiracism.

Concern over the inclusion of antiracist aims may be due to antiracism not being properly understood. Magnus Hirshfeld, himself persecuted by the Nazis, advocated that 'If it were practicable, we should certainly do well to eradicate the use of the word 'race' as far as subdivisions of the human species are concerned; or if we do use it in this way, to put it in quote-marks to show that it is questionable' (1938:57). Yet decades later, we still need to accept that 'race' is a social construct and support young people to recognise racism in its various forms and to ask question and challenge it.

Key components in an antiracist curriculum include exploring the roots of racism and the development of prejudice from its foundations to violence, and learning about stereotyping and the responses to racism (Claire, 1996; Dadzie, 2002; Short, 2004). Short (2004) maintains that antiracists have failed to include the Holocaust when exploring these areas but later he urges educators to be cautious, when examining the historic roots of racism, about equating contemporary examples of racism with the racism in the Holocaust (Short, 2005).

However, an antiracist approach recognises that if we are to understand prejudice today, we need to understand historic prejudice. The two are not the same but there are similarities. For instance, we cannot fully understand the policy of an extremist rightwing group without looking at the history of Nazism. If we failed to explore the links with the past, we would be ignoring the importance of context. Likewise it would be inappropriate to explain the growth of the far right in the 1930s without incorporating study of the roots of antisemitism in the past. Although racism in society may have shifted from its biological form to cultural forms, examining the nature of racism requires the same application of critical thinking and an understanding and recognition of the function of stereotypes and scapegoating (Short, 2004). The skills applied to examining racism during the Holocaust can be applied to contemporary contexts.

Dadzie (2002) recommends that attitudes and of racial violence should be explored as key components of an antiracist curriculum. This entails examining the escalation of racism from verbal attacks delivered, for instance, through the media, to Genocide. She recommends that students explore stereotyping and 'how racial stereotyping underpins racism' (2002:64). Stereotyping can be examined through Holocaust education, looking at how the Nazis used propaganda to dehumanise all Jews. Such study helps to develop students' critical thinking skills or 'metahistorical skills' (Lee, 2004:32). Thus the aims of History teaching and antiracism are certainly not mutually exclusive.

An antiracist curriculum will also consider responses to racism (Dadzie, 2002). The Holocaust allows us to examine the responses of a wide range of individuals in a variety of contexts. Bauer (2002) reminds us, for instance, that the Nazis were sensitive to public opinion. Examining the public's lack of response, in Germany and elsewhere, to the Nazi euthanasia programme and the persecution of Jewish communities, develops students' thinking skills about how people made choices in Nazi Germany and about how people respond to social injustice and prejudice today (Claire, 1996).

Bialystok asserts that students 'must have solid grasp of the history of period 1919-1945, relative to their scholastic ability' (2004:24) before they can engage with ethical issues. Failure to provide authentic history will mean failure to achieve both antiracist aims and historical aims. Teaching history that lacks clarity, detail and complexity is misleading and dangerous. For instance, a lesson which examines Jewish communities solely through images created by the Nazis will affirm and reinforce a stereotype of Jews as dehumanised. Failure to assess the equality impact of such a lesson which presents no images of Jewish people that were taken by their family and friends before the persecution began gives the lesson a seriously inappropriate context. And the lesson fails to develop the historical skills of examining sources, that is, considering perspective and audience. From an antiracist perspective, we fail utterly – potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes by

not exploring human diversity and for disregarding the humanity of the victims and not presenting their true story. In addition, as Novick warns, lack of clarity and detail in the history of the Holocaust allows deniers to use the Holocaust for their own purposes (Novick cited in Cole, 2004).

But we know from research that Holocaust education can impact upon attitudes, so it is important that it is taught sensitively and well. Maitles and Cowan (2006) carried out research into the impact of Holocaust education on pupils' values and attitudes and they found notable – though not universal – positive shifts immediately after the lessons. In the majority of cases 'learning about the Holocaust was a contributing factor to differential attitudes' (Maitles and Cowan, 2006:6).

Short and Reed carried out similar research and concluded that although Holocaust education could not claim to stop racism altogether it can: 'Inoculate the generality of the population against racist and anti-Semitic propaganda and thereby restrict its appeal to the disaffected and politically insignificant rump' (Short and Reed, 2004:6-7). However, this research is small scale and offers no evidence of long term attitudinal shifts. The authors offer no evidence that 'knowledge of racism and its contemporary manifestations' (2004:27) lessens racist behaviour. And other research too is small scale and does not address long term impact.

Holocaust educators, however, have experience of young people expressing changes in their attitudes. But it is difficult to say whether these changes will affect behaviour in the future. As Short remarks: 'the cost of acting in accordance with our conscience can be prohibitive' (Short, 2004:28).

Existing research fails to comment upon the strategies and antiracist approaches used or to explore the impact of the type of used approaches. Further research is needed in order to judge the lasting impact of Holocaust education and to develop a rationale for the antiracist strategies used in teaching.

It has been argued that teaching the Holocaust, with an antiracist rationale, as a compulsory subject in schools has failed. Evidence for this, it is argued, can be seen by the growth of the far right in countries where learning about the Holocaust has been compulsory since the 1990s. This view is simplistic since it does not interrogate the educational methods used. Furthermore, it takes no account of the other influences that impact upon young people, such as parents, communities and the media.

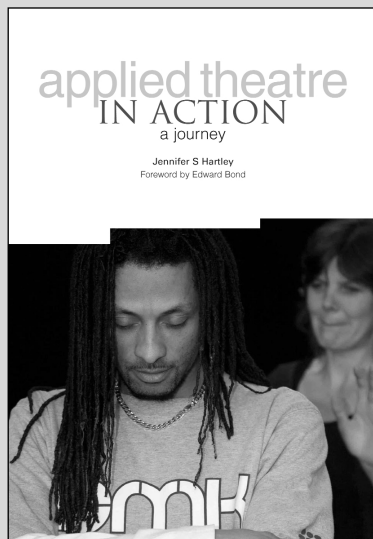
It is important to understand that Holocaust education cannot be a panacea for race equality in our schools and communities. If behavioural changes are to be expected then young people need to be supported when exploring ways in which they can stand up to racism. This would have to happen also in other curriculum areas and be built into the ethos of the school. Prejudice driven behaviour would need to be recognised, reported and responded to. Sadly, there is massive underreporting of racist incidents in our schools in England and Wales (DfES, 2006). A proactive policy for reporting and responding to racism would allow young people to develop strategies that support them to taking a stand.

Discussing antiracism in education, Gillborn identifies 'a tangible need for action rather than eloquent speeches and empty gestures' (2008: 1999). He points to Delago's observation that 'empathy – the shallow, chic kind – is always more attractive than responsibility, which is hard work' (Delago in Gillborn, 2008:1999). These antiracist educators emphasise the need for schools to implement antiracism fully, and to deal with racism in schools in a proactive way. A punitive, 'preaching' approach can simply entrench views and opinions. An antiracist approach, on the other hand, allows for opinions to be discussed and challenged using rational critical thinking which demands evidence and can question its validity. Holocaust education can support this through exploring the choices (or lack of choices) faced by bystanders, perpetrators, rescuers, resisters and victims but cannot achieve antiracist attitudes on its own.

Applied Theatre in Action a journey

Jennifer S Hartley

Foreword by Edward Bond



Jennifer Hartley takes her readers on a journey that is as gripping as it is instructive, opening up the world of applied theatre to a larger audience through her remarkable stories. She immerses us in the projects that have shaped her unique approach to applied theatre, be they in ganglands in the USA, with refugees in Africa, torture victims and their torturers in South America, youth projects in the UK or working on the worldwide problem of domestic abuse. Her stories open up the world of applied theatre to researchers, educators and students in the field, but this compelling book is also for those new to the field.

For applied theatre to work it must, believes Hartley, defy any single definition or practice and be in constant flux so it develops with every project and the people involved. The work may be carefully planned but it is never predictable. This book illustrates how lives can be changed through the use of applied theatre.

Dr Hartley works nationally and internationally as an educator and director, adapting established practices and developing new approaches in applied theatre. She is the founder and director of the UK registered charity Theatre versus Oppression, which uses applied theatre to bring about positive change and development.

2012, ISBN 978 1 85856 496 8

188 pages, 244 x 1170mm, £22.99

Kushner points to the anomaly whereby the government supports Holocaust education on one hand, stating that the lessons to be learnt from it in terms of antiracism are vital, while on the other hand imposing 'draconian asylum seeker legislation' (1999:216) without appearing to see the glaring inconsistencies. He argues that without practical application of lessons learnt, we can be accused of 'dumbing down' Holocaust education and antiracism to nothing more than a 'feel good factor' (Kushner, 2004: 216).

To avoid oversimplification of both Holocaust education and antiracist education, our approaches and aims must be rearticulated. Research in relation to long term attitude change has not yet produced conclusive results but the small scale research demonstrates the beginnings of positive attitudinal change, and supports Holocaust education with an antiracist rationale. Applied together, they can strengthen each other.

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