

Teaching the Holocaust: to simulate or not?

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Twenty eight British citizens who helped Jews and other persecuted groups escape the Nazis were awarded a 'Hero of the Holocaust' medallion by the UK government in March of this year. The attending recipients were two centenarians; Sir Nicholas Winton who had played a vital role in bringing nearly seven hundred children to from Germany and Nazi- occupied Czechoslovakia to the UK on the kindertransports; and Channel Islander Phyllis Le Druillenec, whose husband and sisters-in-law had helped hide a Russian prisoner of war. The other recipients had since died and were posthumously awarded this honour. They included Church of Scotland missionary Jane Haining, who had refused to leave the Jewish orphans who were in her care in Hungary. She was deported to Auschwitz, where she was murdered in 1944.

At the same, there was national media interest on another aspect of the Holocaust, namely teaching it to primary children through role play. This involved a simulation activity that was included as part of a Holocaust teaching programme. Aimed at developing pupil empathy for victims of Holocaust experience this led to distressing pupils. The class teacher was reported to have told her pupils that she had received a letter from the Scottish Executive saying that nine children were to be separated from their classmates and that those who were born in January, February and March had lower IQs as a result of a lack of sunlight in their mother's womb, had to wear yellow hats and go to the library (Mail Online 2010). Lasting about 15 minutes, several pupils were in tears while one boy demanded to speak to someone in charge (East Kilbride News 2010). While one may applaud the efforts of this pupil to exert his rights, this incident raised a number of issues.

The first concerns the appropriateness of teaching the Holocaust in the primary sector. The Holocaust is a popular topic that is sometimes taught as part of a study on WW2 and there is a considerable amount of research that supports its teaching to primary pupils (Short and Carrington, 1991; Maitles and Cowan, 1999; Short, 2003; Cowan and Maitles, 2007). Its teaching to primary pupils is also supported by organisations such as the United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum, and in the UK, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Anne Frank Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust. Each has produced educational materials and exhibitions for pupils in this age range. Furthermore, at this year's national Holocaust Memorial Day event in London, it was a group of South Lanarkshire pupils from Woodside Primary School who poignantly spoke on film discussing what they had learned about the Holocaust and their legacy of hope for the future. Hence teachers, pupils and parents should be confident that the Holocaust can be taught effectively and appropriately to primary pupils.

The second concerns whether teachers should deliberately seek such an emotional, albeit accurate response from all pupils-primary or secondary. Perhaps our pupils too coddled and protected and would benefit from learning when taken from their comfort zone? Yet we would argue that it is inappropriate and/or unethical for teachers to be quite so deceptive. Quite apart from the hysterical responses it may yield from pupils, it can cause serious damage to teacher-pupil relationships and to school-parental partnership. In my teenage years I once attended a residential summer camp where the theme unknown to me at the time, was the Russian Revolution. On arrival we were separated from our friends, had certain personal belongings confiscated and were told to wait until specific people had taken their food before we were 'allowed' to eat. As the leaders wanted, we soon 'revolted' but while we learned from this experience, the leaders lost our respect and afterwards they had to work extremely hard to win our trust. Teachers must prevent this from happening.

One difficulty however is that teaching controversial areas such as the Holocaust, genocide and the abuse of children's rights, is upsetting for many pupils. It is a matter of debate as to whether these areas can effectively be taught to pupils without some level of distress. Role play can be used to develop empathy by for example, giving pupils a choice of scenarios or allowing pupils to devise their own scenario where they can apply what they have learned about racist Nazi policy. One common example used in primary schools is when pupils role play a scenario where an employer interviews an applicant with the required skills and experience but does not give him the job because he is Jewish. This example arouses emotions in the pupils and can develop their empathy for victims of prejudice in an appropriate way. However Schweber (2003) warns that teachers have to be vigilant of 'curricular creep', i.e. teaching the topic to an ever younger age group – as that she felt that her Grade 3 class in USA (aged about 10 years) was too young for the simulation used.

The most famous and controversial simulation is that of Jane Elliott. In response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. over thirty years ago, Elliott devised the controversial and startling, "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes" exercise (Peters, 1987). This famous exercise labelled participants as inferior or superior based solely upon the colour of their eyes and exposed them to the experience of being a minority. It was designed to show the impact of discrimination on both victims and bystanders. It was controversial at the time and is still discussed today. Whilst it is not necessary to link the Elliott experiment to genocide per se, it is clearly possible to link the two and try to suggest the ultimate horrors that can develop from discrimination. It is still in use and has been the subject of much debate, as has been the Gestapo Holocaust simulation, which tries to show what happened during the Holocaust by involving the players in life and death decisions, which most do not 'survive'. (Narvaez, 1998; Short News, 2006; Elliott, 2009).

The critique is that simulation debases the memory of the Holocaust and does not reflect what really went on, that simulations reflect poor pedagogy and oversimplify Holocaust history. As one example, an 8th grade teacher in the US called upon his colleagues to be involved in the experiment on discrimination as 'a day of sheer pleasure for the staff being themselves as Nazi officers and becoming Adolfs...because staff need the stress relief and entertainment' (Elliott, 2009). Critiques of such simulations come from individuals and organisations heavily committed to Holocaust education. Dawidowicz (1990) and Totten (2000) for example argue that they reflect poor pedagogy and oversimplify Holocaust history. Totten is particularly critical and argues that,

"For students to walk away thinking that they have either experienced what a victim went through or have a greater understanding of what the victims suffered is shocking in its naivety. Even more galling is for teachers to think that they have provided their students with a true sense of what the victims lived through--and/or to think they have at least approximated the horror and terror the victims experienced" (Totten, 2002:122).

The Anti-Defamation League in the USA is one organisation that claims that simulations can trivialise the experience, stereotypes group behaviour, distorts historical reality, reinforces negative views, impedes critical analysis and disconnects the Holocaust from its historical context. It cites one simulation (in Florida), where children were very distressed,

crying and one child reported that *'The only thing I found out today is that I don't want to be Jewish'*. In other words, this approach can have exactly the opposite impact than teachers want. Further, there is a fear of psychological scarring shown by the blue eyes/brown eyes children experiencing stress and disengagement for a period afterwards. One parent at St Hilary's reportedly thought the simulation activity was 'cruel' and 'traumatic' (Mail Online 2010). Nonetheless, there are those who argue that using simulation is an issue of pedagogy and can encourage pupils to consider the Holocaust from the perspectives of bystanders, victims and perpetrators (Ben-Peretz, 2004; Drake, 2008; Narvaez, 1987; Ruben, 1999; Schweber, 2003). Jane Elliott, an advocate of such simulations, expresses caution. She argues that it needs experienced teachers, extensive debriefing, experienced facilitators and a strong rapport between pupils and teachers for it to work (Drake, 2008).

The key point in the recent case in South Lanarkshire is that while the school and its local authority value Holocaust education, and the teacher undertook the simulation for the best of reasons, the pedagogical issues were not fully explored beforehand. There is a case though not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. With a bit of tuning and understanding of what the aim of the simulation is, it can work very well. This raises the issue of teachers' Continued Professional Development. There is little or no development in curricular areas or topics, such as the Holocaust, that are not specifically tied to Government or local authority's priorities, or School Development Plans. In contrast The Holocaust Education Development Programme has begun an organised professional development programme for secondary teachers and education advisors in England to develop their skills in teaching the Holocaust. Its two day workshops for teachers involve discussion, reflection and modelling and may well include consideration of simulation activities. If so, the simulation approach can contribute in a meaningful way to individual citizenship and to a genuine appreciation of our 'Heroes'.

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