

## Research Note

# Exploring children's ideas about the Holocaust in secondary schools

by Michael Gray ([graym@stedwardsoxford.org](mailto:graym@stedwardsoxford.org))

**Abstract:** *Pupils arrive in the classroom with a range of ideas about the Holocaust, which is part of History education in English schools at Key Stage 3. This covers years 7, 8 and 9, although the Holocaust is typically taught towards the end of this Key Stage at the age of 13-14. This research intends to explore common preconceptions and consider the implications for teaching and learning. Knowing about these preconceptions is important for teachers so that they can clarify interpretations and misconceptions.*

## Introduction

The Holocaust is taught in all English schools during Key Stage 3 History lessons. There is evidence to suggest that pupils arrive in these classes with preconceptions about the past and about the Holocaust itself (Pendry, 1997; Donovan & Brandsford, 2005; Edward's and O'Dowd, 2010). It is necessary for teachers to know what preconceptions their pupils arrive with so that they can develop pre-existent knowledge and understanding, while seeking to challenge or dismantle popular myths, prejudicial opinions or misconceptions. The exposure to Holocaust-related ideas through recent films like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, popular literature such as *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, or visits to exhibitions all help to build up a wealth of intellectual baggage which the practitioner needs to be aware of when teaching the topic.

## The Aims and Nature of the Research

The purpose of the research will be to build up a picture of the common ideas that are prevalent amongst 13-14 year olds in English Schools. According to the national survey carried out by the Holocaust Education Development Programme, it is during Year 9 that the Holocaust is most commonly taught. Yet what factual knowledge do children have about this topic in terms of who carried it out, when it happened, where it happened, why it happened and how it ended? What do they understand by the terminology that is associated with the Holocaust, such as 'Nazi', 'Auschwitz' or 'concentration camp'? How do they interpret the term 'Jews' and what do they understand about this group? While a number of previous studies have simply focused on the attitudes of children (Cowan & Maitles, 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b), this study is trying to explore ideas. In other words, it is looking not so much at attitudes but rather 'attitudinal-knowledge'; their perceptions, knowledge and understandings.

While recognising that the breadth and scope of pupils' ideas will be immense, the research hopes to pick up on common trends that exist. Studies carried out suggest for example a perpetrator-oriented explanation of the Holocaust, which is Hitler-centric in its outlook (Ivanova, 2004; Edwards and O'Dowd, 2010). This was supported by recent pilot studies that I carried out in 2011. In addition to many pupils appearing to attribute all of the processes and guilt of the Holocaust to Hitler alone, many respondents also demonstrated confusion about the structure of the camp system and both how and why the Holocaust ended.

By recognising common patterns, teachers will be in a better position to know what sort of ideas they are likely to experience from pupils when they first teach them about the Holocaust. It could also help to influence the nature of Holocaust curricula to ensure that

certain misconceptions are challenged and particular areas of Holocaust ignorance are dealt with.

The nature of the research will be twofold: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The first of these will help to uncover some of the areas of knowledge and ignorance which are present, while the interviews will enable a more qualitative approach; exploring attitudes, perceptions and the sophisticated nature of children's understandings. The research will conform to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and seek to ensure that no harm is caused, while producing maximum benefit for the respondents. The sensitive nature of the subject matter was also something that was important to consider and my methodology was influenced by ethical issues which researchers in this field had previously raised (Carrington & Short, 1993).

## Existing Literature

The wealth of literature on Holocaust education has largely focused on debates about aims and content. Despite this, there have been some studies on what ordinary members of the public know about the Holocaust, many of which have been carried out by the American Jewish Committee in various countries (Golub & Cohen 1993, 1994). In addition to these, case studies have been carried out in the USA (Bischoping, 1998, Totten 1998) and Canada (Jedwab, 2010), although these have largely focused on adult knowledge rather than pupil ideas. Major studies in Sweden (Lange, 2008) and England (Pettigrew, Foster, Howson, Salmons, Lenga and Andrew, 2009) looked at the attitudes, teaching patterns and knowledge of teachers with regards to the Holocaust. In addition to these, localised research, often using very small sample sizes have been carried out in Ukraine (Ivanova, 2004), the USA (Totten 1998) and England (McIntyre, 2008; Edwards and O'Dowd, 2010).

Based on this existing empirical research, it seems apparent that there is some variation in the sort of understandings that are held by people in different countries but that pupils in English schools do come to lessons with pre-existing ideas about the Holocaust. The research that I carry out will be the first large-scale study of pupil ideas within English secondary schools. The findings may help practitioners to plan their teaching of the Holocaust from a learner-centred perspective in order to build on existing knowledge and challenge misconceptions.

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