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Misconceptions and knowledge gaps in Holocaust education: considerations and challenges in the context of teaching aims and contemporary issues

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Abstract

For decades, academic literature has explored how the Holocaust is taught in schools, finding that many educators draw on this history to teach about the dangers of prejudice and discrimination. However, this well-intentioned approach is not always underpinned by the teaching of sound historical information about the Holocaust, thus undermining the moral and civic messages that teachers seek to convey. Sometimes referred to as a 'lessons from' approach, numerous studies and academic literature have explored the complexities and potential pitfalls of this approach which is prevalent within English history classrooms. Given disturbing increases in misinformation, disinformation and antisemitism, it is plausible that teachers will be even more committed to prioritising civic and moral outcomes. This paper draws on survey data from 299 history teachers, finding that they give significance to deriving broader lessons about issues such as racism from the Holocaust. However, the situation is complicated and needs to be considered with reference to teachers' own misconceptions about the Holocaust.

Additionally, the content that teachers covered in their lessons, and the challenges they encountered when teaching about the Holocaust are explored.

Keywords: Antisemitism; Disinformation; Holocaust education; Misconceptions; Secondary School Teachers.

Introduction

This paper reports on data collected in 2019 and 2020 to investigate teaching of the Holocaust in England. The study (see Author et al., year) sought to replicate research conducted by Pettigrew et al., (2009) utilising a similar online survey to explore how teaching practices had changed across a decade. Data collection continued during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic and meant that arguably some data was out of date almost as soon as it was collected. National lockdowns meant schooling rapidly and significantly changed in 2020 and 2021 including school closures, remote teaching and lost learning. During this period, the Holocaust was no longer taught in the classroom but taught to students in their homes through computer screens. And even though Covid restrictions ended in England by spring 2022, the repercussions of Covid continue including students making slower progress than expected, mental health and wellbeing issues and a decline in socio-emotional skills (Major et al., 2024; SIMS, 2023). Despite this, the data continues to have relevance and adds some especially pressing insights considering troubling worldwide trends witnessed in recent years.

The aim of this paper is to explore teaching practice within Holocaust education and reflect on the findings in the context of recent disturbing trends including the proliferation of disinformation and sharp rises in antisemitism. As explained later, while this study involved secondary school teachers across England from different school disciplines, this paper focuses on the data collected from history teachers. This is because the Holocaust is a mandatory topic on the history national curriculum in

England, and thus, exploring the trends emerging within this group warrants attention. Before the survey data is presented and discussed, this paper will begin by summarising the debate surrounding the objectives of Holocaust education, followed by evidence about how disinformation and increased antisemitism impacts on Holocaust education. Given that the study's data were collected in England, an overview of Holocaust education in England is also provided. However, while this study is based on a specific national context, arguably the findings have broader relevance given that Holocaust education is taught worldwide, and the global nature of the troubling trends highlighted in this paper.

The objectives of Holocaust education

The purposes of Holocaust education have been the subject of debate globally for decades (see: Feinberg & Totten, 2016; Foster, 2020; Kinloch, 1998; Lindquist, 2008; Mihr, 2015; Pettigrew, 2010, 2017; Salmons, 2010; Wogenstein, 2015). It is a complex discourse which cannot be fully documented in this paper. However, to give a snapshot, literature has explored if and how learning about the Holocaust contributes to various attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, usually with moral and civic framings. Evidence has drawn attention to approaches that draw on the moral 'lessons' from the Holocaust, sometimes based on only basic and/or (inadvertently) flawed knowledge of the history. This is because the nature of this history means teachers approach it differently compared to other topics and draw on it to illustrate the dangers of prejudice and discrimination, rather than focus on disciplinary content (Eckmann & Stevick, 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2009; Russell, 2004; Totten., 1999). This approach has attracted criticism for the potential superficiality of moral messages and thus, underpinned the argument that history teachers should only focus on the historiography of the Holocaust (Kinloch, 1998). However, increasingly educators and academics have argued that

students need robust historical knowledge about the Holocaust which they can draw on to explore broader meanings from this period (Feinberg & Totten, 2016; Foster 2020; Karn, 2012; Salmons, 2010).

Contemporary challenges for Holocaust educators

While many academics and educators highlight the necessity of sound historical knowledge as the cornerstone from which contemporary meanings can be derived, this approach has become especially complex in recent years given the current global context of division and polarity. Fuelling this situation is the increasing prevalence of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kużelewska and Tomaszuk, 2022).

Evidence has highlighted people's susceptibility to believing disinformation. For example, Duffy and Dacombe (2023) found a third of respondents – drawn from the British public – believed in conspiracy theories. They also found that around 40-50% of those who endorse conspiracy theories get their news from YouTube and TikTok. These are worrying findings given that (a) evidence suggests adolescents prefer to go to YouTube and TikTok for news (Ofcom, 2024) and (b) analysis by UNESCO (2022) showed material that denies or distorts the Holocaust is available on several major online platforms. For example, 19% of Holocaust-related content on Twitter, and 17% of this material on TikTok, denied or distorted this history. Even though moderation reduced the prevalence of this content, 'camouflaging' this material and/or signposting users to unmoderated platforms or more radical forums meant it was easily accessible (UNESCO, 2022).

Clearly exposure to and belief in disinformation is alarming within the context of all school curricula. However, within the context of Holocaust education, these fears are especially salient because conspiracy theories are frequently connected to

antisemitic content. Even where a conspiracy narrative appears not to be antisemitic, often it can be traced back to an earlier antisemitic incarnation (Byford, 2011; Rich, 2024). Additionally, since the 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians and the conflict in Gaza, reported incidents of antisemitism have soared. In the UK, the Community Security Trust (CST) had been reporting an upward trajectory of antisemitic incidents for years, but the Hamas terrorist attack drove a sharp 147% rise in these incidents in 2023 (CST, 2024a). Recent data at has shown the highest number of antisemitic incidents reported to CST occurred in the period January-June 2024 (CST, 2024b). Similar patterns have been observed globally, with increased antisemitism following on from the Hamas terrorist attacks reported in numerous countries including Australia, Austria, Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, South Africa and the United States. (Tel Aviv University/ADL, 2024).

Given educators' proclivity for drawing on the Holocaust to teach about prejudice and discrimination, it seems logical that learning about antisemitism would be a critical element of this. This includes learning about the genesis of antisemitism, how it has developed over two millennia, the Nazi form of antisemitism and how antisemitism manifests in contemporary society. However, evidence suggests this may not always be the case. In a large-scale review of research outputs published between 1945-2020 investigating the outcomes of teaching and learning about the Holocaust, Pistone et al., (2024) found that antisemitism was often not mentioned. This could account for trends found in England by Foster et al., (2016), including 68.0% of students aged 11-18 years being unable to identify what antisemitism referred to. In interviews, Foster and colleagues observed this knowledge gap appeared to contribute to students uncritically adopting various myths and misconceptions about Jews widely circulated in contemporary culture.

The notion that learning about the Holocaust will automatically be a panacea to contemporary antisemitism is problematic given there is little empirical research to evidence this (Pistone et al., 2021). Although there is some evidence to suggest how the Holocaust is taught can limit opportunities for students to learn about antisemitism. For example, Rajal (2024) argued that in Scotland, while a focus on individual experiences is important for restoring the names and stories to victims, limited teaching about the perpetrators means students lack knowledge about the Nazi era and the specific context of antisemitism before, during and after this period. When Horn (2023) posed the question '*is Holocaust education making antisemitism worse?*' she argued that while Holocaust education can address denial and distortions through teaching historical facts, it does not address contemporary antisemitism and instead reduces antisemitism to a Holocaust-specific phenomena. Based on museum visits and conversations with educators in America, Horn observed the Holocaust being isolated from the rest of Jewish history and misconceptions about antisemitism starting and finishing with the Holocaust.

However, even when there is specific focus on learning about antisemitism, it does not necessarily follow that young people (and their teachers) will recognise and reject antisemitism when they encounter it. In Austria, since 2016, teachers are required to define and distinguish between forms of antisemitism and racism. Additionally, in 2021, a national strategy against antisemitism was presented including increased professional development for teachers on antisemitism. Despite this, evidence has indicated that school students struggle to define antisemitism, and up to a third of under-25 years olds have antisemitic attitudes (Rajal, 2024). Rajal argues that antisemitism cannot be tackled simply through teaching more about the Holocaust. Regional context must also be considered. For example, in the case of Austria being a post-Nazi state, she

argues that students need the opportunity to grapple in a constructive and thoughtful way with the question of guilt as part of Holocaust education.

Holocaust education in England

The study reported in this paper is based on data collected in England. The Holocaust has been listed as essential content in England's statutory National Curriculum since it came into effect over 30 years ago. Delivered within history, at Key Stage 3 (when students are aged 11-14 years), the directive has never outlined the content that teachers should cover or how it should be approached. Instead, teachers can draw on the history national curriculum guidance more broadly. This states that students should have knowledge and understanding of numerous aspects including chronological narrative, abstract terms such as 'empire', historical concepts such as 'cause and consequence', and methods of historical enquiry (DfE, 2013). This guidance reflects an increased focus on 'knowledge-rich' curricula following a major review of England's National Curriculum which sought to provide a "tighter, more rigorous, model of the knowledge which every child should expect to master in core subjects at every key stage" (DfE, 2010, p. 10).

There are a dearth of studies exploring how the Holocaust is taught in history classrooms in England. However, a national survey by Pettigrew et al., (2009) with over 2,000 teachers suggested many teachers adopted an approach where learning lessons from the Holocaust was a principal focus, with two thirds of history teachers (66.7%) selecting the aim 'to develop students' understanding of prejudice, racism and stereotyping'. Over half of teachers (54.9%) sought to ensure students 'learned lessons from the Holocaust so that a similar human atrocity never happens again'. In contrast, just a third (33.3%) selected 'deepening knowledge of World War II and Twentieth

Century history'. The prioritisation of social/moral dimensions was also articulated in interviews conducted by the research team.

Pettigrew et al., (2009) also found important gaps in teachers' historical understanding. For example, 46.3% of history teachers did not know the systematic mass murder of Jews began in 1941 with the invasion of the Soviet Union. Only 22.7% of history teachers knew that when a member of the German occupying forces refused an instruction to kill Jewish people, they were excused from killing and given another duty. Similarly, only 24.3% of teachers knew that fewer than 1% of the of the German population in 1933 was Jewish.

Knowledge gaps like this, especially when coupled with 'lessons from' approaches, can be problematic. This is because when teachers (and by extension, their students) have incomplete or inaccurate knowledge, it risks undermining the meanings they take from the Holocaust. For example, young people will take different insights about human values when they erroneously believe that perpetrators were shot for refusing to obey an order to kill Jewish people compared to when they understand the broader factors that contributed to perpetrators' actions, such as the widespread collaboration and complicity of people across Europe.

Study aims

In this paper, data is presented from history teachers based in secondary schools across England. The following research questions will be considered:

1. How is the Holocaust taught in England in relation to teaching aims and content covered?

2. What misconceptions do teachers have when teaching about the Holocaust?

3. What challenges have teachers encountered when teaching about the Holocaust, and how do the challenges relate to current troubling trends in online content and antisemitism?

Materials and methods

Procedure

The study involved an online survey and was approved by the university's research ethics committee and adhered to BERA ethical guidelines (2018). This included giving participants detailed information, gaining their informed consent, and storing their information securely complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The survey was hosted by the platform *SurveyMonkey*. Secondary school teachers with any experience of teaching content related to the Holocaust, irrespective of subject discipline, could complete the survey. Thus, it was widely advertised through subject associations and educational networks. Additionally, all secondary schools in England were contacted by email. The survey first presented respondents with a detailed information sheet explaining how the study adhered to ethical guidelines and data protection regulations. Respondents completed consent questions before starting the survey and the survey was completed anonymously. Once the survey was closed, the data was transferred to SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis.

Participants

Overall, 1,077 teachers completed the survey and of those, 964 had taught about the Holocaust in the preceding three years. The survey sought to collect comprehensive information about teachers' entire experiences of delivering Holocaust education. This meant that many teachers had taught about the Holocaust in more than one subject

and/or to multiple year groups (grades). This is common practice in England, especially in humanities departments (McInerney, 2018). However, it presented difficulties when exploring trends in data because it was not always clear which subject and/or year group the teaching practice applied to. Consequently, this paper focuses on teachers who identified only teaching about the Holocaust within history lessons *and* only doing this in Key Stage 3 (when students are aged 11-14 years). This is because the Holocaust is mandatory content on the Key Stage 3 history National Curriculum in England.

Overall, there were 299 respondents teaching about the Holocaust *only* within Key Stage 3 history lessons. On average, they had 11.9 years of teaching experience. Just under two-thirds of the respondents were female (62.2%) with 37.3% male and 0.4% preferring not to say. Most of the teachers reported their ethnic group as White (95.1%), with less than 1.0% indicating Asian/Asian British, less than 1.0% as multiple ethic background, and less than 0.5% for each of the other ethnic groups. This was broadly representative of the teaching workforce at the time, although nationally the proportion of teachers identifying in a White category was 87.8% (GOV.UK, 2021) so there was some variation between the study sample and national trends.

Overview of survey

The survey explored teaching practice in relation to the Holocaust, replicating questions used in Pettigrew et al., (2009). Additionally new questions were added to the survey to reflect the wider socio-political and policy level context of schools at that time. The survey comprised mainly of closed questions (multiple-choice or likert scale) alongside several open-ended questions. It is not feasible, given the focus of this paper, to report on all elements of the survey. Readers should see Author et al., (year) for a copy of the full survey. Details of the survey questions explored in this paper are outlined in the next section with the accompanying findings.

Data analysis

The analysis presented in this paper is descriptive rather than conducting inferential analyses to determine statistical significance. This because the nature of the questions means that findings of individual questions provide greater insight into different teaching aims, misconceptions and challenges, which would be lost if the questions were aggregated into, for example, a Holocaust-knowledge score. Instead, trends in the data will be identified and discussed.

Results

Research question 1: How is the Holocaust taught in England in relation to teaching aims and content covered?

Teachers were presented with a list of 13 possible aims for teaching about the Holocaust and asked to select three that most closely matched the aims they considered to be most important. Ten of the aims were from Pettigrew et al., (2009) and three additional aims were created. Two of the new aims drew on the Holocaust as an opportunity to address contemporary politics and contemporary antisemitism. The other aim was about the promotion of fundamental British values (FBV).[i] The question limited teachers to selecting three aims, so they had to reflect on the relative significance of each aim in the context of their own teaching. It is acknowledged that this question could have been framed differently to give more nuanced insight into teaching aims (and this is explored in the discussion session), but it was replicated for the present study to allow comparisons between the studies.

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently selected aim was 'developing an understanding of the dangers of societal prejudice, racism and stereotyping', selected by almost two-thirds of history teachers. In contrast, only a quarter of them selected the aim to 'deepen knowledge of the Second World War and twentieth century history'.

Table 1. Percentage of teachers selecting each aim

Aim	**Percentage selecting aim**
To develop an understanding of the dangers of prejudice, racism, and/or stereotyping in any society	64.8
To explore the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organisations and governments when confronted with human rights violations and/or policies of genocide	41.4
To learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again	37.9
To understand and explain the actions of people involved in and affected by an unprecedented historical event	28.3
To explore the implications of remaining silent and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others	26.2
To deepen knowledge of World War II and twentieth century history	24.8
To memorialise those who suffered	19.7
To reflect upon the moral and/or ethical questions raised by events of Holocaust	18.6
To reflect upon political questions about power and/or abuse of power, raised by the Holocaust	17.6
To tackle antisemitism in contemporary society.	13.4

To support the school's statutory duty to promote the British values of: democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty and/or mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs.	4.8
To reflect upon the theological questions raised by events of the Holocaust	0.3
To encourage pupils to take an interest in contemporary international politics.	0.7

To explore the content taught, teachers were presented with a list of 34 topics taken from Pettigrew et al., (2009) and asked to tick the ones they included in their teaching of the Holocaust. The number of topics each teacher taught ranged from 4 to 33, with an average of 18.6 topics (standard deviation=5.8). The teachers spent 1-36 hours teaching about the Holocaust, with a mean of 10.9 hours (standard deviation=5.98).

Table 2 gives the full list of topics and the percentage of teachers who included them in their teaching. The most frequently taught topics by almost all teachers included Kristallnacht, Nazi ideology, Auschwitz-Birkenau, The Nuremberg Laws, and the experiences of individual men, women and children who were persecuted by the Nazis. In contrast, very few history teachers explored the concept of suffering, the impact of the Holocaust on the Declaration of Human Rights and changes in awareness and understanding of the Holocaust since 1945.

Table 2. Percentage of history teachers who taught each topic

Topic	**Percentage**
Kristallnacht	95.7
Nazi ideology	94.7

Auschwitz-Birkenau	94.0
The Nuremberg Laws	93.6
The experiences of individual men, women and children who were persecuted by the Nazis	91.8
An account of life in the ghettos in Occupied Poland (e.g. Warsaw)	85.1
The study of Hitler's rise to power and the Nazi State	81.9
Propaganda and stereotyping	79.8
The choices and actions of bystanders	78.4
The long history of antisemitism	78.0
The Einsatzgruppen (Holocaust by bullets)	73.8
The study of World War II	70.9
Resistance to Nazi policies by Jews	70.2
The Wannsee Conference	68.8
Jewish and social and cultural life before 1933	65.6
Liberation of camps	56.4
The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising	52.5
Jewish resistance in the camp system	47.5
The Holocaust as an unprecedented event in human history	46.5
The reaction of countries around the world to Jewish refugees	43.3
The contribution of Jews to European social and cultural life before 1933	39.7
The experiences of Holocaust survivors since 1945	39.7
Combating current racist ideology	34.8
Other genocides	34.8

Human motivation and behaviour	32.3
Postwar justice and the Nuremberg trials	30.5
Treblinka	28.0
The impact of the policies of the Christian Churches	23.8
Operation Reinhard	19.9
The impact of the Holocaust on the Declaration of Human Rights	17.4
Changes in awareness and understanding of the Holocaust since 1945	14.9
Exploring the concept of suffering	12.1

Research question 2: What misconceptions do teachers have about the Holocaust?

Teachers' historical knowledge was principally gauged through ten multiple-choice questions (see Table 3). Six multiple-choice questions were created by Pettigrew et al., (2009) after consultation with historians to identify a small number of key pieces of historical information that teachers and students could draw on to understand the Holocaust in meaningful ways. Four new multiple-choice questions were created for the present study to reflect more recent scholarship in the field. Each question had a series of response options which included one correct answer (see Author et al., (year) for questions and all response options). Clearly, assessing knowledge of this complex and vast topic through a small selection of questions has drawbacks and this is highlighted in the discussion section of this paper.

Table 3. The percentage of teachers selecting the correct answer on each knowledge question

Question	**Correct answer**	**Percentage correct**
When Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the majority of Jews living there were...?	Forced to live in ghettos.	98.0
The programme by which approximately 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children were admitted to Britain as refugees in 1938-39 was known as…	Kindertransport	98.0
The largest number of Jewish people murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators came from…?	Poland	89.5
Which of the following were death camps built specifically for killing Jewish people? *(Tick all that apply on this question, with three correct options.)*	Treblinka Sobibor Chelmno	72.8 57.9 53.1
When did the British government first know about the mass murder of millions of Jews?	They knew it was happening in 1941–1942	66.7
In percentage terms, the Jewish population in Germany in 1933 was…?	Fewer than 1%	51.8
The first group to become victims of a Nazi mass murder programme were…?	Disabled people	51.4

Systematic mass murder of Jewish people began in…?	1941, with the invasion of the Soviet Union	48.4
If a member of the German occupying forces refused an instruction to kill Jewish people, the most likely outcome for that individual would be that they were…?	Excused from the killing and given other duties	48.2
What was the response of the British Government when they learned about the mass murder of Jews?	Said they would punish the killers when the war was over.	45.9

The findings showed that teachers had sound knowledge in some areas. For example, almost all teachers knew that Jews were forced to live in ghettos when Nazi Germany invaded Poland and what the Kindertransport referred to. Most teachers (89.5%) correctly indicated that the largest number of murdered Jewish people came from German-occupied Poland. However, on some questions only around half of teachers correctly answered the question. Thus, for instance, knowledge was lacking about who the first victims of a Nazi mass murder programme were and that the Jewish population in Germany was minute, making them a vulnerable minority group. As described in the discussion section, these basic misconceptions can have profound implications for how the Holocaust is understood, and in turn, have an impact on the contemporary meanings that can be derived from this history.

Research question 3: What challenges have teachers encountered when teaching about the Holocaust, and how do the challenges relate to current troubling trends in online content and antisemitism?

Teachers were presented with a list of challenges and asked to indicate whether they had encountered each challenge 'always', 'often', 'occasionally' or 'never' when teaching about the Holocaust. The list was informed by classroom challenges that were discussed in interviews for Pettigrew et al., (2009).

Overall, almost all teachers, at some point, had encountered students becoming emotionally distressed by the topic. However, this tended to be a challenge encountered 'occasionally'. Similarly, concerns about being unable to answer students' questions, students articulating prejudiced and/or discriminatory language, and students believing information on the internet regardless of its source and accuracy were cited by the majority of teachers, although they were not daily occurrences. In terms of challenges encountered 'often' or 'always', the most frequently cited was insufficient curriculum time (40.4% encountered this always or often). Teaching the Holocaust to year 7/8 students due to a two-year Key Stage 3 was also encountered regularly by some teachers. Usually, Key Stage 3 covers school years 7,8 and 9, and Key stage 4 covers school years 10 and 11, when students are aged 14-16 years and studying for the General Certificate in Education (GSCE) qualification. However, some schools start the Key Stage 4 curriculum in Year 9 to give more time to prepare for the GCSEs, and this is what the 'two-year Key Stage 3' challenge refers to.

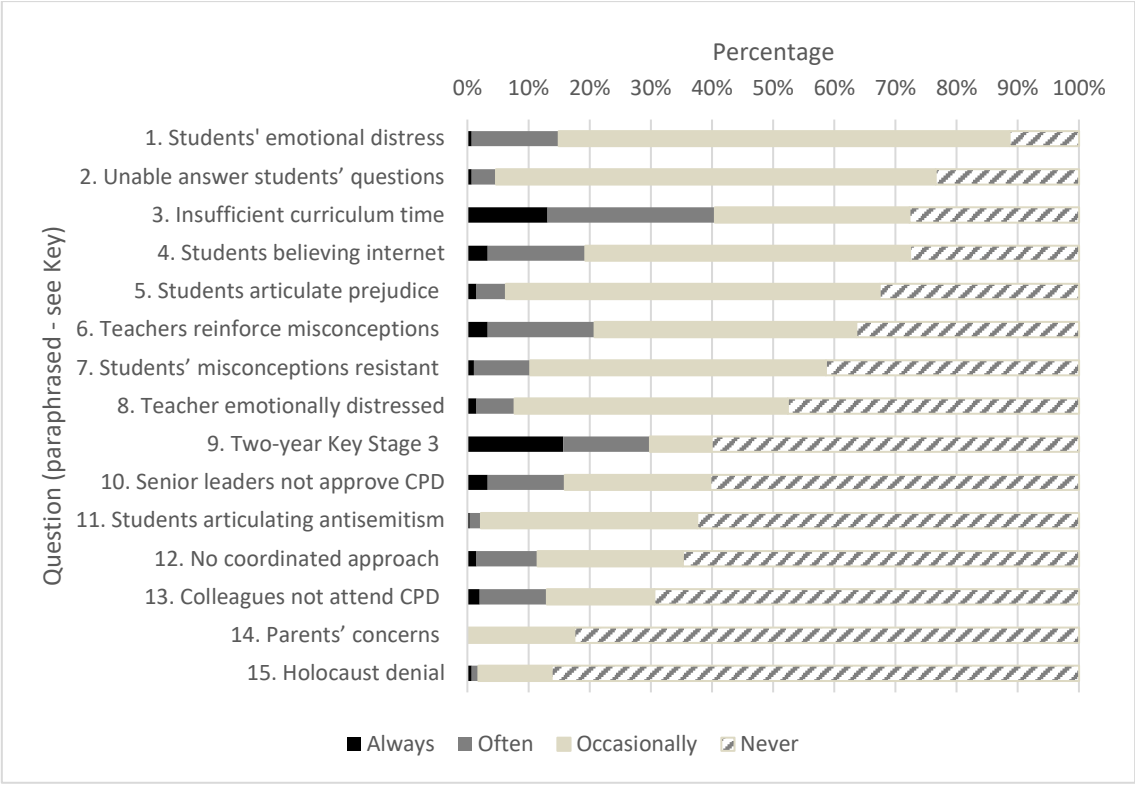

Figure 1. The frequency with which teachers encountered each challenge

Key: full wording of challenges represented in Figure 1

1. Students becoming emotionally distressed by the topic
2. Unable to answer students' questions
3. Insufficient curriculum time
4. Students believing information they find on the Internet regardless of the source or accuracy of the information.
5. Students articulating prejudiced and/or discriminatory language.
6. Teachers who lack specialist knowledge inadvertently teaching or reinforcing common misconceptions about the Holocaust
7. Certain student misconceptions being particularly resistant to change despite covering these issues in lessons.
8. Becoming emotionally distressed as a teacher.

9. Teaching this subject to students in Years 7 or 8 because of a two-year Key Stage 3 curriculum.
10. Difficulties in getting senior leaders to approve time out of school to attend Holocaust education continuing professional development (CPD) courses.
11. Students articulating antisemitic attitudes
12. The reluctance of teachers in other departments/subject areas to work on a coordinated approach to Holocaust education.
13. The reluctance of teachers in other departments/subject areas to attend specialist Holocaust education CPD courses when they have the opportunity to do so.
14. Parents' concerns about this subject being taught to their child.
15. Holocaust denial among students

Of course, the prevalence of a challenge was not always the most salient metric to consider. Some challenges were reported with low frequency yet were deeply concerning, such as students articulating antisemitic attitudes (encountered by 2.2% of respondents always or often, and 35.1% occasionally). Additionally, 6.2% of teachers always or often observed students articulating other forms of prejudiced and/or discriminatory language (61.1% did so occasionally). Given that antisemitic incidents have soared in recent years, as have the number of Islamophobic incidents (Faith Matters, 2023) it could be argued that teachers are now even more likely to encounter these problems in their classrooms.

Discussion

Key findings and implications

This study sought to explore how the Holocaust is taught in schools in England by history teachers as part of the National Curriculum and reflect on the findings in the context of salient disturbing trends in the last few years, notably, the proliferation of online disinformation and rising antisemitism. Although conducted in England, this study has relevance more widely given the issues highlighted are global concerns, and the Holocaust features in school curriculum in over 100 countries (Carrier et al., 2015).

How is the Holocaust taught in England in relation to teaching aims and content covered?

As described, the National Curriculum does not stipulate the objectives of Holocaust education, the content that should be covered or how many lessons should be allocated. However, teachers can draw on the history curriculum's broader aims, which emphasise the acquisition of historical knowledge and understanding disciplinary concepts (DfE, 2013).

In the present study, when asked about the relative importance of a range of teaching aims, two-thirds of history teachers cited developing an understanding of the dangers of prejudice and racism, whereas less than a quarter of teachers selected the aim of students' deepening their knowledge of the history. Arguably, this appears somewhat at odds with the general approach of the history curriculum, but it resonates with literature in the field which has highlighted how the Holocaust is used to teach about broader issues such as racism and prejudice (for example, see: Chapman, 2020; Feinberg & Totten, 2016; Kinloch, 1998; Pettigrew, 2010; Pettigrew 2017; Salmons, 2010).

However, caution is needed when interpreting this data, because teachers were responding to short statements about teaching aims, and irrespective of the ones they selected, teaching historical information will have been an aspect of their lessons. Even so, it is notable that in the context of a curriculum focused on disciplinary knowledge and understanding that the 'lessons from' approach appears to be prevalent within Holocaust education. In many ways, this approach is unsurprising; wanting to galvanise young people is an honourable endeavour, and arguably students cannot meaningfully study the Holocaust without reflecting on these dimensions. As Chapman (2020) points out, many of the 'Why?' questions that students raise when they learn about the Holocaust are beyond the scope of disciplinary history. The issue, as discussed below, is when the moral and social dimensions are subsumed within narratives based on insufficient knowledge and misconceptions.

The survey findings indicated that teachers were covering a broad range of topics; on average 18.6 topics across 10.9 hours. Many of the teachers included Nazi ideology, The Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht and Auschwitz-Birkenau in their Holocaust units. These topics lean into the historiography of the Holocaust and potentially respond to educators' and academics' counsel that students need sound historical knowledge to meaningfully grapple with contemporary meanings. However, the nature of the survey question – with teachers only ticking the topics they taught – meant it was not possible to scrutinise the details of what was being taught and how it was framed. But for some respondents at least, covering so many topics within a relatively limited timeframe would mean only superficial engagement with the history, which is further diluted if focus turns to the moral meanings that can be derived from this information.

What misconceptions do teachers have when teaching about the Holocaust?

The findings of this study suggest that not only are some students potentially exposed to only surface knowledge about the Holocaust, but that some of the information that teachers impart may be inadvertently flawed. There were certain areas of knowledge where less than half of teachers could identify the correct answer, and this finding was particularly notable given the respondents were history teachers. These findings give rise to uncomfortable questions about what students are learning if their teachers are unsure about the history themselves. Indeed, Foster et al., (2016) found many students had gaps in their knowledge about the Holocaust and entrenched misconceptions, even after a period spent learning about the Holocaust.

Teachers' knowledge gaps (and by extension students' knowledge gaps) have significant implications when drawing universal lessons from the Holocaust. This is because very different lessons are derived from the Holocaust when misconceptions are subsumed into narratives about the Holocaust. For example, this study found around half (51.8%) of teachers correctly identified that less than 1% of the German population was Jewish in 1933. Relatedly, it is also instructive to note that Foster et al., (2016) found that just 8.9% of students could correctly answer this question. Undoubtedly, 'lessons' about prejudice, discrimination and tolerance derived from the Holocaust are severely undermined when teachers and students do not know that in Germany in 1933 only a very marginal proportion of society (just 505,000 people of a total population of 67 million) was Jewish. Without this knowledge, the implications cannot be accurately and meaningfully reflected on, and there will be no appreciation that in 1930s Germany, the Jewish population was a vulnerable, minority group.

Similarly, the contemporary meanings that are derived from the Holocaust when young people erroneously believe perpetrators were shot for refusing to kill Jewish

people are very different from the insights that can be gained from knowing that perpetrators had agency. In the present study, half of history teachers did not know that the military and police were given another duty if they did not want to participate in killings. Of course, there will have been innumerable reasons for perpetrators' decisions at the time. However, the historical record suggests that many people willingly took part in mass murder, emboldened by a climate where the Nazis propagated antisemitism, scurrilously claimed a Jewish threat and dehumanised Jews (Hayes 2017).

When teachers and students have misconceptions about responsibility, they will struggle to recognise and understand the broader factors which contributed to the Holocaust. This includes the impact of widespread collaboration, complicity and apathy of people across Europe. Moreover, in failing to understand the Holocaust as a society-wide and gradual process, teachers will struggle to explain, and their students will struggle to understand, what genocide refers to and how it unfolds. In relation to the teaching aims discussed earlier, while historical details about the Holocaust are likely to be taught alongside moral and civic dimensions, teachers may inadvertently pass on common misconceptions to their students, thus undermining the contemporary insights they wish to instil into students.

These knowledge gaps were identified by Pettigrew et al., back in 2009, and the continuity of these trends raises questions for today about why certain misconceptions persist and how to support teachers delivering this complex subject. The potential consequences of knowledge gaps and misconceptions about the Holocaust are evolving because of the proliferation of antisemitism, conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs on social media platforms. Incomplete and erroneous understanding makes it tricker to identify inaccurate and scurrilous material linked with the Holocaust and/or the Jewish community and risks people inadvertently buying into these disturbing narratives.

It is important not to criticise teachers for these knowledge gaps. Even though the Holocaust is a compulsory topic on the history school curriculum, there is no mandate for teachers to participate in professional development for teaching about the Holocaust. For some teachers their only educational encounter with this history occurred when they were an adolescent at school. Thus, whilst the presence of misconceptions in their thinking is striking, some teachers will not have had opportunities to study this history in detail, and their misconceptions reflect narratives that proliferate within contemporary society. This highlights the necessity for those tasked with teaching about the Holocaust, irrespective of disciplinary background, to have access to high quality professional development opportunities.

What challenges have teachers encountered when teaching about the Holocaust, and how do these challenges relate to current troubling trends in online content and antisemitism?

The findings revealed variations in how often different challenges were experienced, but given that challenges were qualitatively different, the frequency with which a challenge occurred was not always the most insightful metric. Patently, some challenges that were rarely encountered are incredibly serious when they manifest, such as Holocaust denial among students. Additionally, seemingly unexceptional challenges can have significant implications. For example, insufficient curriculum time is arguably a concern that applies to numerous topics taught in school and teachers are adept at making decisions about the content they prioritise. However, given the tendency of teachers to draw on the Holocaust to teach about prejudice and discrimination, while also bearing in mind the importance of students acquiring sound knowledge about the Holocaust, insufficient curriculum time within Holocaust education is problematic. It takes time to identify, unpack and address students' misconceptions about the

Holocaust, and to meaningfully explore the contemporary insights that can be derived from this history. Arguably even more time is needed for this given the misinformation, conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial and antisemitism that are now easily accessible on mainstream platforms such as TikTok commonly used by young people (UNESCO, 2022).

While most teachers in this survey had not encountered Holocaust denial among students, just over a third of teachers occasionally encountered antisemitic attitudes (and 2.2% did so 'often' or 'always') which is a sizeable minority, especially when considering the possibility of students who harbour antisemitic thoughts but do not articulate them in front of teachers. Relatedly, almost two-thirds of teachers (61.2%) reported occasionally encountering students articulating other prejudiced and/or discriminatory language. Evidence suggests these are ongoing and evolving issues, which mean the broader context in which Holocaust education is delivered is rapidly changing. For instance, since the COVID-19 pandemic, antisemitic narratives have become more prevalent within online covid-conspiracies (CST, 2022). More recently, since the Hamas attack on the 7th October 2023, the proliferation of antisemitism and online misinformation and disinformation, including about the Holocaust, has been documented (CST, 2024b).

Recommendations

In light of some of the knowledge gaps identified in this paper, greater awareness of common misconceptions is needed, especially for history teachers. They should be encouraged to evaluate and develop their knowledge in non-judgemental settings as part of research-informed professional development. Additionally, educators, researchers and policymakers must grapple with questions about how moral and civic dimensions are most meaningfully addressed within the context of sound historical

knowledge. This includes careful consideration about the nature of the social and moral 'outcomes' that educators anticipate will arise from Holocaust education (see Hale, 2020 for further discussion) and avoiding cautionary yet superficial messages about prejudice and discrimination. The field needs to recognise the potency of online content to young people on platforms such as TikTok, which in the UK they spend over two hours a day using (Statista, 2024). It sounds counterintuitive, but an increased focus on learning the lessons of the Holocaust, does not necessarily mean young people will be better equipped to identify pernicious content and misinformation, when this is not underpinned by sound historical knowledge and understanding.

Given the rapid rise in antisemitism, teachers may feel that their Holocaust unit gives an opportunity to teach students how to identify and challenge antisemitism. However, as illustrated through the work of Pistone et al., (2021) more research is needed to examine if and how Holocaust education can provide a means to understand and tackle contemporary antisemitism. Especially given evidence suggesting that current approaches to Holocaust education might be impeding well-intentioned aims to draw on the Holocaust to teach about and tackle contemporary antisemitism (see Horn, 2023 and Rajal, 2024). Indeed, given the complexity of contemporary antisemitism, dedicated resources to support teachers and students to recognise, understand and challenge contemporary antisemitism are needed.

Study limitations

As described, many of the survey questions were taken from Pettigrew et al., (2009) to enable comparisons between the two studies. However, the format of the questions meant that nuance was missing from the data. Indeed, while surveys are a valuable tool for gauging the prevalence of different misconceptions, experiences, or attitudes – critical for building a national portrait of teaching practice, survey data often

lacks the detail afforded by other methods (see Chapman and Hale, 2017). Future qualitative research is needed, not only to add nuance and detail to the national trends, but to consider how the disturbing worldwide trends discussed in this paper are permeating into Holocaust education and impacting on both teachers' and students' knowledge.

Potential bias in the sample should also be noted because teachers who had an interest or proficiency in Holocaust education might have been especially motivated to complete the survey. This could account for some of the findings, such as the content-rich Holocaust education curriculum delivered across multiple lessons. Even so, several issues were identified, such as teachers being unsure about how to answer students' questions and having their own knowledge gaps. Thus, if even the most motivated and experienced teachers in terms of Holocaust education were encountering these issues, this highlights the need for specialist continuing professional development for teachers.

Conclusion

The study presented in this paper highlights the prevalence of certain misconceptions about the Holocaust, even amongst history teachers. Knowledge gaps in any topic are always cause for concern. However, when coupled with the 'lessons from' approach within Holocaust education, misconceptions become even more problematic. Arguably, this situation will continue as educators look for ways to nurture acceptance and prosocial behaviour, and challenge intolerance and division within the current context of misinformation, disinformation, and soaring antisemitism. Of course, learning from the Holocaust and reflecting on its contemporary significance is vitally important, but it is widely acknowledged that students cannot meaningfully develop this insight without secure historical knowledge (Feinberg & Totten, 2016; Foster et al., 2016; Foster, 2020; Pettigrew et al., 2009; Salmons, 2010). As this paper has demonstrated, the Holocaust is

a complex topic, and even history teachers can be misinformed about certain aspects. This means that now, more than ever, the complexities inherent in the teaching and learning of the Holocaust must be recognised, and high-quality professional development opportunities that respond to these challenges are made accessible to teachers.

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[i] Since 2014, all schools in England have been required to "promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs" (DfE, 2014, p. 5) as part of their legal duty to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development. The promotion of fundamentally 'British' values has received widespread concern and criticism (see Revell & Bryan, 2018; Hunter-Henin & Vincent, 2018; Jerome et al., 2019). And one, arguably unintended, outcome is that some teachers fulfil the FBV directive through Holocaust education (Pearce, 2020). There is little empirical research to explore the ways in which these two features of the curriculum have been connected but see Pearce (2020) and Critchell (2020) for further discussion.