REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLOCAUST AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

Ian Davies is based at the University of York, where he is Professor of Education. His publications include *Teaching the Holocaust: educational dimensions, principles and practice* (Continuum, 2000) and *The Sage Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy* (2008). He teaches on a wide variety of programmes including history initial teacher education.

Paula Mountford is based at the University of York where she is Director of Initial Teacher Education and Co-ordinator of the History Post Graduate Certificate in Education. Her wide professional experience includes working on projects with the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) and the national government Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Her publications include *Human Rights in the Curriculum—History* (Amnesty International, 2002) and Working as a team to teach the Holocaust well: a Language-centred approach *(Teaching History, 2001).*

ABSTRACT

This article has three main sections. Firstly, we suggest that despite explicitly stated commitments by key decision makers on the need to provide valid forms of Holocaust education there is some evidence to suggest that there are very many challenges that are still to be faced. Second, we outline some of the principles and main ideas that we feel are relevant to those who are enrolled in programmes of initial teacher education for history. Finally, we provide by illustration of Holocaust education that takes place in one context, some practical suggestions for what could be done in universities and schools to help with the development of initial teacher education.

Holocaust Education is vitally important. It is obviously necessary for all to understand this terrible crime against humanity and it is essential that we consider the connections between the Holocaust and other genocides. It is too simplistic to suggest that knowledge of significant and specific events and issues from the past and establishing connections with other (including contemporary) matters will necessarily lead to a more decent world, but it would seem to us impossible to accept any arguments that would seek to avoid this form of education. In this article we examine the background that may help us to understand the situation in England in relation to the development of successful programmes of Holocaust education; we suggest some principles and issues that need to be considered if we are to develop more of those successful programmes; and, finally we give a specific and practical illustration of what could be done as part of an initial teacher education programme in history.

BACKGROUND

It is both reassuring and disturbing to reflect on the situation concerning Holocaust education in England. Initially, the situation seems positive given the wealth of comment and practical support that is signalled frequently across a wide range of sources. Key individuals have made their support clear for programmes of Holocaust education. Ed Balls (government minister for education) is quoted on the web pages of the Holocaust Educational Trust as follows:

> The Holocaust was one of the most horrific and profound events in world history and I want every young person to have an understanding of it. Over 60 years on there are still lessons that we can all learn from this and the funding we are announcing today is money wisely spent.

> Teaching of the Holocaust is compulsory in all secondary schools between the ages of 11 and 14 and can also be studied in GCSE [for examination of students aged 16] History courses when studying the Second World War. There is also scope to cover it in English, Politics lessons and Citizenship classes. The Holocaust Educational Trust's project is extremely valuable and one I am delighted the Government is able to support." (http://www.het.org.uk/content.php?page_id=263 accessed 23 April 2009)

Further reassurance can be found in the relatively recent establishment of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust which and there are a large number of organisations which are doing very valuable work by, for example, raising awareness and providing teaching resources (see http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/cat/4/ accessed 23 April 2009). The Memorial Day takes place on 27 January (the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau) and commemorates the lives of those lost in the Holocaust as a result of Nazi persecution and in more recent genocides. The theme of the 2009 commemoration was 'stand up to hatred'. Some of the organisations involved in Holocaust Memorial Day and other work specifically provide teacher education activities (e.g. the Holocaust Educational Trust took a group of teachers to Yad Veshem in August 2008 for a series of lectures on key issues and workshops on practical pedagogical matters). The UK government funded Teacher Training Resource Bank contains relevant resources and there are very many networks and organisations that work specifically in the field of multicultural education (e.g. Multiverse http://www.multiverse.ac.uk/). Major academic conferences take place to explore complex matters and promote better understanding (e.g. a conference on the histories and cultures of anti-Semitism in England, from the Middle Ages to the present day was held in London in July 2007). European organisations are very active in this field with, for example, 2008 being the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The Council of Europe "has developed a wide range of educational tools and works closely with the Task Force for International Co-operation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF)" http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Press/StopPressView.asp?ID=2119 accessed 23 April 2009).

And yet, there are significant problems. It should be admitted that much of the activity referred to above is prompted by high levels of concern. In other words, initiatives may emerge from a need to challenge injustice as opposed to the need to reinforce an already positive situation. The statement of government minister Ed Balls that has been quoted above was made following comments from some high profile public figures that seemed to suggest that Holocaust education would not be required in schools. The rationale for key publications (e.g. Lecomte 2001) is that teachers lack knowledge and classroom resources (see http://book.coe.int/EN/ficheouvrage.php?PAGEID=36&lang=EN&produit_aliasid=1544, accessed 23 April 2009). Indeed, some evidence about attitudes in society suggests that there are very disturbing levels of ignorance and prejudice (e.g. de Laine 1997). More specifically, Garawal (1999) suggests that a good deal more support is needed for student teachers including greater cultural sensitivity among teacher educators. Teaching the Holocaust is still a very controversial matter (as the recent suspension of 2 drama teachers in England has shown, see http://community.tes.co.uk/ forums/t/308780.aspx accessed 4 May 2009). Furthermore, whereas some research suggests that student teachers are positively inclined to what broadly could be referred to as liberal initiatives and goals (e.g. Robbins, Francis and Elliott 2003) others (e.g. Wilkins 1999) have suggested that the student teachers themselves have attitudes that are incompatible with the realisation of a decent society.

Whether because of the existence of severe problems or because of the need simply to celebrate and reinforce social justice there is some evidence to suggest that education can be effective in dispelling myths and promoting social justice (e.g. Sinott 2003). While not all evidence is in agreement with such an optimistic position (e.g. Washington 1981) we are heartened by Lemos' work (2005) who, following a review of projects that aimed to challenge and change racist attitudes in young people has suggested that most projects were "successful at conveying the message that racism was wrong, and in influencing behaviour and attitudes positively".

PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMES OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AS PART OF AN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN HISTORY

What, then, needs to be done? There are three broad areas that beginning teachers need to consider in a programme of initial teacher education that aims at least in part to develop clearer understanding and appropriate teaching and learning about the Holocaust. At the risk of using slightly awkward titles we will refer to these areas as: the intellectual; the representational and the societal.

By 'intellectual' we mean, simply, that student teachers should understand something of the Holocaust and be able to discuss and develop arguments about it. Was it a unique set of circumstances and/or should it be seen as something that is 'merely' another example of genocide. If it is both unique and an example then what frameworks of ideas relate to it? Is it a cognitive or emotional matter? Some might argue that the Holocaust is not to be seen as something that can be understood in rational terms. Perhaps its barbarity puts it beyond academic comprehension and it can only be seen emotionally? Is it, principally, a Jewish matter even if there were many other groups including those with disabilities whose human rights were denied?

By 'representational' we mean that beginning teachers need to consider a range of issues concerning how the Holocaust is presented. There are important debates about where the responsibility lies for characterising the Holocaust. Some have argued fiercely against the actions by national governments and the European Union of declaring certain events to be genocide. In 2006 the French Parliament, for example, adopted a bill that makes it a crime to deny that Armenians suffered genocide by the Turks during world war 1. For some this type of involvement by governments sets a dangerous precedent that takes power from historians and gives it to politicians. In such cases the question of who should decide what happened in the past is a very controversial matter. But there are also other types of representation that are contested. Adorno famously declared that there would be "no poetry after Auschwitz". Is it acceptable for novels, films and plays to portray aspects of the Holocaust?

Finally, the beginning teacher should have a view about the connections between the Holocaust and contemporary society. What do people think about social justice, what do they know about Judaism, what is current policy regarding the fight against discrimination and prejudice? In all of these matters are people more or less likely to be committed to social justice depending on the type of society in which they live. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have recently argued that more equal societies almost always do better in almost all ways. Others have argued for a decent society to be seen in terms of trust (e.g. Fukuyama 1995). The search for the precise key to a society where genocide could not occur is necessary as is a general awareness of the various approaches that are possible and the ability to consider the options with a keen sense of humanity.

Following the outline of these rather general matters it is necessary for us to focus a little more on what could be done with student teachers of history. We agree with Lemos' (2005) view that any projects that aim to challenge and change racism should have "well-defined objectives, a clear structure, a range of inputs, sustained activities over a period of time, and a focus on encouraging reflection on personal attitudes and experiences". We also feel that a particular style of history education is likely to be most beneficial. We are very persuaded by Haydn's (2000) arguments to move history education away from a style that is fairly close to preaching. He opposes an unhelpful approach that simply declares 'This is what happened. Wasn't it terrible?' He urges us to go towards a more evaluative stance in which some of the following questions could be posed:

- What happened, and how do we find out about it?
- Why are there different accounts and explanations?
- How do we find out which accounts and explanations are most valid? (Which can we trust?)
- Why does it matter- why is it important/significant?
- In what way does this effect the present and the future; what light does it shed on current problems and issues?

In outlining these questions Haydn is encouraging us to probe the Holocaust principally in relation to the historical concept of significance. By doing this there are opportunities not only to undertake extremely useful historical work but also to ensure that the Holocaust is not seen simplistically and inappropriately as something that is a part of the past. Hunt's (1999) use of Partington's criteria would be very helpful to begin discussions with student teachers. Those criteria are:

1. Importance-how important was it judged to be by people at the time?
2. Profundity- how deeply were people's lives affected?
3. Quantity- how many lives were affected?
4. Durability- for how long have people's lives been affected?
5. Relevance- in terms of the increased understanding of present life.

> "Successful at conveying the message that racism was wrong, and in influencing behaviour and attitudes positively."

If these ideas can be used by student teachers as they learn to work with young people then we believe that there is the potential to achieve a great deal. But, of course, rationales and indications of key issues and content are insufficient by themselves. An illustration of how student teachers could be taught to teach is vital. The process of educational work is often as—or more - important than what is 'covered'. As such the final section of this article gives an illustration of what sort of work could be done in a session that takes place in an initial teacher education programme for history student teachers.

AN EXAMPLE OF AN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION SESSION FOR HISTORY STUDENT TEACHERS

During the one year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme in England there are opportunities to plan a specific workshop on 'Teaching the Holocaust'. This one session, however, is far from all that is done. It is one of the means by which we develop our thinking about how we approach this topic and build a deeper knowledge and understanding across the year. The development of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has enabled us to create an accessible facility that draws

together articles, websites, links to museums and a shared resource section for student teachers to use on and off campus. Student teachers are thus allowed to read, research and reflect upon a number of articles, issues and websites prior to the workshop on 'Teaching the Holocaust'. This provides the background reading for a starter activity within the session and includes reference to sources including Voices of the Holocaust—The British Library ISBN 0712305076; Lessons of the Holocaust—video footage produced by the Spiro Institution and The Holocaust Educational Trust; Anne Frank Internet site—http//www.annefrank.nl/ Small groups of student teachers can engage in discussions focusing on questions such as 'Why teach the Holocaust?' and 'How to teach the Holocaust?' to encourage debate and reflection on whether to teach the holocaust in terms of developing historical knowledge, skills and understanding, to use it as an opportunity to focus in on moral education or to adopt a combined approach.

Jewish in Europe before 1933?' Kate Hammond (2001) has created an excellent card sort or 'washing line' activity to support investigations into this area. Student teachers are invited to take part in the activity, taking on the role of learners. Each card contains a brief summary of an event and the date. The cards are all linked to the persecution of the Jews over a 2000 year period. Learners could be asked to work in pairs and asked to work with flip chart paper on which a two circle Venn diagram has been drawn. One section is labelled 'religious persecution' and another 'racial persecution', with an overlap section between the two circles. Learners are asked to read the cards, discuss the issues and make a decision about where to place the card. On completion of the task, whole group feedback and follow up questioning takes place. A range of useful skills are developed and demonstrated during this activity: pair work/collaboration, speaking and listening, classification skills and discussion. Hammond (2001) then suggests that

> "Well-defined objectives, a clear structure, a range of inputs, sustained activities over a period of time, and a focus on encouraging reflection on personal attitudes and experiences."

Following this preparatory work we develop a second activity which focuses on a robust and rigorous key question that is both challenging and engaging. This links to earlier workshops that focused on planning mini schemes of work and planning key questions to structure enquiries and engage and motivate learners. Kitson (2001) suggests that teachers work with an overarching key question 'How could the Holocaust have happened?' and four smaller enquiry questions:

- What was it like to be Jewish in Europe before 1933?
- How did Hitler change anti-Semitism?
- What was 'the real opinion of the German people?'
- What was the Final Solution?
- Who could have stopped the Holocaust?

In groups of three Student Teachers are asked to discuss and deconstruct these questions, focusing on what skills and historical knowledge school students will be demonstrating and engaging with. They can be asked to discuss whether these questions allow the teacher to challenge stereotypes and avoid a superficial study of the topic. Student teachers are then asked to either use the Kitson questions or to generate their own key questions to work with during the session. This links with Riley's (2000) article in Teaching History where he provides criteria to support the creation of historically rigorous questions that engage and challenge learners.

The third activity of the session focuses on the first of Kitson's smaller enquiry questions: 'What was it like to be

washing lines are set up in the classroom and students given one card each so that they may reflect individually upon their card, discuss with neighbours and make a decision about where to 'peg' the card on the washing line. The ends of the lines indicate 'minor' to 'major' persecution. Again a range of skills are developed in this decision making exercise and demonstrated, with a mini-plenary drawing together key issues and ideas as well as an overview of the chronology of anti-Semitism. Hammond (2001) suggests a number of questions that could be asked during the mini-plenary:

- Is it more serious to persecute for religion or for race?
- Is planned, 'lawful' persecution by the government of a 'civilised' country worse than persecution by criminals or a mob?
- Can emotional suffering be as serious as physical suffering?
- Does motive make an injustice more unjust?
- Is it the number of deaths that makes one massacre more terrible than another?

Student teachers would then be introduced to a further range of useful resources including oral histories, video footage, picture source material, web sites and asked to work in pairs or small groups to plan one of the other key questions generated during activity two. Again a mini-plenary session would allow the whole group to share and engage with discussion and debate. Finally, resources, activities and lesson plans would be shared via the VLE.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need to ensure that the Holocaust is commemorated and that teaching and learning takes place that helps young people understand the past and make justifiable connections with contemporary society. We suggest that initial teacher education is one of the key engines of educational reform and that there is a particular opportunity to develop valuable work in the context of history education. The links between this work and the development of improved understandings, attitudes and practices are clear: not to take action in this field would be unprofessional.

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