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To Teach and How to Teach the Holocaust: That is the Question

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Abstract: Although facts about the Holocaust are generally known, many adults find it difficult to convey this information to children, as it is often considered too disturbing for them (Epstein, Andrews, Gray & Maws 2013). Teachers, in particular, need alternate ways to introduce students to the Holocaust and other disasters (Wooding & Raphael 2004; Salmons 2003). Based on a document study of children's drawings from the Terezin concentration camp, and research into the Holocaust and pedagogy for presenting difficult issues to children, this paper presents a strategy for teachers to introduce the Holocaust to students in the middle school years of Grades 6 to 10. We begin with a discussion about how to introduce sensitive historical material, such as the Holocaust, to young children. Current teaching models about the Holocaust are based on factual texts (Keith 2013) or fictional writings (Epstein, et al. 2013). This is followed by a poem, developed out of the first author's research, introducing the Holocaust while conferring facts about the life of a fictitious child in the Terezin concentration camp. Teacher notes elaborate on how to implement this poem in class. We found that art, such as poetry, can be utilised to teach children about sensitive issues like the disaster of the Holocaust. Further, this poem is written from the perspective of a child interned in Terezin, who may or may not have survived.

Key Words: Teaching the Holocaust; Terezin concentration camp; sensitive historic issues

Introduction

The disaster of the Holocaust, which occurred between 1939 and 1945 in Europe, has been documented from many different perspectives and is remembered yearly in various countries as a mark of respect to the Jewish people (Kane 2010). An ongoing debate has developed about whether to teach children about the Holocaust, when to introduce the topic, and especially how to present this information in a child appropriate way (Short 2003). According to Fuhrmann et al. (2008), “teachers have to walk a fine line of incorporating information” when teaching about disasters (112) to avoid disturbing sensitive students or to implement “shock tactics” by relying solely on facts (Salmons, 2003, 139). Equally questionable is the teaching of this topic through fictional literature; not based on facts, to make the horror more ‘palatable’ for children. This, however, could detract from understanding the seriousness of the suffering and murder of 6 million Jewish people (Rutland 2010; Stargardt 1998). As Epstein et al. report, whichever way this topic is viewed, “teachers find the Holocaust a challenging subject to deal with in the classroom” (2013, 107).

Blatter and Milton (1981) reported how helpless adults feel about the Holocaust “being an evil beyond imagining ...that [makes] sensitive human beings...wrestle endlessly with the torment of the unanswerable” (10). As teachers, we must be even more sensitive when introducing this, and other disasters, to children.

The role of “emotional learning” (Rutland 2010) has to be considered in this context, as studies have shown that children remember how they felt when taught about disasters (87). According to Rutland: “One image burnt into their mind can resonate indefinitely” (Cohen as cited in Rutland 2010, 87), thereby causing lifelong trauma (Epstein, et al. 2013).

In most Western countries, curriculum requires teachers to teach the Holocaust. This paper discusses an arts-based strategy: to teach the Holocaust through a poem. The poem is based on text and drawings from the first author’s research into the lives of the children of Terezin. It comprises snapshots of the life of a young Jewish girl in the years from 1941 -1945, showing her struggle with the conditions of her situation.

It is argued that Art, such as poetry, can be utilised to teach children about sensitive issues like the disaster of the Holocaust (Wilson & Kahn 2008). Basic facts have been incorporated into the poem so as to provide an authentic impression to school children of a similar age as this Terezin child. The narrator of the poem is a child of 11 years of age, who writes from her perspective as a concentration camp prisoner. It is never made clear whether she survived. Students are carefully led into this time of historical significance, by developing ethical considerations and activating empathic responses.

Presenting difficult Issues

Considering the complexity of this historic disaster and the impact it might have on sensitive young children (Epstein, et al. 2013; Wilson & Kahn 2008), teaching the Holocaust is problematic for teachers at all levels. Mandated curricula require the teaching of Disaster Education and Social and Historic events, such as the Holocaust. Teachers are required to find a balance between presenting the accurate, but horrific facts, and ‘watered down’ accounts that almost fictionalise these events (Fuhrmann et al. 2008). With increases in natural and human-made disasters in recent years, children are confronted almost daily with visual material on television and other media, impressing on their minds the fear of living in an unstable world (Wooding & Raphael 2004). Equally, Boon and Pagliano (2014) have

pointed out that, when disasters happen, children are the most vulnerable. Their needs for stability in their daily lives are shattered by disaster (Fuhrmann et al. 2008), and the “Fear of the Unknown” is the strongest emotion a child can ever experience (Sorin 2003, 121). Being shocked by visual material, or feeling deep empathy with the victims of a disaster, can produce lasting trauma in a sensitive child (Cohen as cited in Rutland 2010).

Fuhrmann et al. (2008) advocate for disaster preparedness, relating that we have to “educate, but not to scare children” (113) about disasters. They state that the quality of the lessons taught depends on the teachers: how they integrate the information into various subjects; what they consider age appropriate; and how sensitively they deliver the material.

However, research has shown that a child’s response to disaster “is a complex interplay of pre-existing vulnerability, differing stressors and differing impact” (Wooding & Raphael 2004, 10). Therefore, disaster teaching relies heavily on teachers’ intuitive and professional knowledge of the children in their care so as to avoid traumatising.

Overall, researchers have found that teachers need to teach about human-made and natural disasters due to global issues such as terrorism, wars and climate change. As such, teachers require accurate information about particular disasters. Furthermore, they need to be acutely aware of the intellectual and emotional levels of their students, as there will be differential responses to the information presented (Wooding & Raphael 2004). In fact, knowledge and realistic fear about disasters can strengthen resilience in children (Dufty 2014; Sorin 2003).

Why teach the Holocaust?

Over the years, several pertinent questions relating to the teaching of the Holocaust have been asked. For example:

- Why then teach the Holocaust...when it is “emotionally confronting for both our students and ourselves?” (Keith 2013, 57).
- Why share this extremely “painful history” of the Jewish people with young children? (Kane 2010, 114)
- Why is teaching the Holocaust “explicitly mentioned” in the curriculum? (Lander 2013, 10; Salmons 2003, 139).

- Why teach the Holocaust when this involves complex ethical and personal choices for teachers for we are “looking at humanity in extremis” (Lander 2013, 10): a problematic issue that “theologians, philosophers and artists have ...wrestled with [because] of the moral, social and spiritual implications”? (Ibid, 10)
- How can teachers ‘jam’ this multidimensional subject into the few hours of teaching history or other subjects like ethics, religion, citizenship or English? (Keith 2013).

This document study provides compelling arguments as to why teachers should teach the Holocaust. Although there are varying opinions on when or how to teach the Holocaust, authors are in agreement that this is a necessity as we live “in a world in which genocide has become rather commonplace” (Keith 2013, 57). The genocide (a term coined by Lemkin in 1944, as cited in Lander 2013, 10) of six million Jews is an example of humankind in an extreme situation (Ibid). It is hoped that by teaching this, students will understand why “racism, stereotyping and discrimination” can result in mass murder (Short 2003, 120; Wilson & Kahn 2008).

Lander wants students, when taught about the Holocaust, to become aware of the “capacity for violence and compassion” in every human being (2013, 12). It is envisioned that the important “moral, social and spiritual” values taught (Ibid, 10) will lead students to gain insights and make informed choices when confronted with injustice in our modern world (Salmons 2003). According to Rutland (2010), Holocaust education “can provide an important educational framework to promote...positive interfaith and interethnic relations” (75)...given that teachers are aware of suitable Holocaust teaching material and the emotional needs and reactions of their students. It is not only a moral obligation to remember and teach the Holocaust, but also a tribute to the 1,500,000 children (similar in age to the students being taught), who lost their lives in this historic genocide.

When to teach the Holocaust

Researchers have found no agreement on when and how to introduce the Holocaust. Ziv, Golden and Goldberg (2015) note that “there are no clear-cut answers”! (521). Kane (2010) responds to the question of when to teach the Holocaust, saying, “It is hard to know what is age-appropriate. Some things are difficult to know and tell at any age” (115).

The Israeli Ministry for Education (2014) has designed a new curriculum to teach the Holocaust from kindergarten on, in connection with the Holocaust Remembrance Day (Ziv, et al. 2015). However, researchers have questioned the introduction of this material at such an early age, as children might develop anxieties when confronted with facts about the Holocaust. It is debated as to whether children in the early years of school are cognitively ready to understand what is being taught; they might become stressed and wonder if it could happen again (Kane, 2010). Ziv, et al. (2015) then question whether a “purposeful creation of trauma, albeit in a protected environment, may be necessary for effective cultural learning” (525). However, this means reliving memory and passing on group trauma (Epstein et al. 2003).

Epstein et al. (2013) question whether it is appropriate, even in primary school, to teach the Holocaust. They cite Short (2003) who states that any children under the age of 12, hearing about the Holocaust, would be traumatized by the accounts of genocide. Others think that teaching disasters to primary students might achieve better understanding, producing empathy and moral learning (Wilson & Kahn 2008). Young children’s trauma could be worse than any insights gained from exposure to the topic, making it difficult for teachers to cope with distressed children. Teachers should consider Newman’s warning about trauma in childhood (as cited in Kezelman & Stavropoulos 2012), as it affects the developing brain, causing psychological problems, susceptibility to stress and can influence mental health in later life. Further, research has not shown evidence that children who have been informed of the atrocities of the Holocaust display more empathy to others than those who have not been taught about it (Ziv et al. 2015).

Short (2003) suggests that, rather than teaching moral values, using the example of the Holocaust, it is necessary in Western countries to first instruct children about “Jewish culture and identity and the Jewish roots of Christianity” in order for them to understand the complexity of the issue (128). Koestler (as cited in Salmons 2003) wants to impress on the general population that “it is their duty to know and to be haunted by [their] knowledge” (148); therefore students within the English school system need to know about the Holocaust before age 14 in order to remember the reasons and brutality of the Jewish genocide.

In the Australian Curriculum, the Holocaust is presented in Grades 9 and 10, as part of History studies. For Lander (2013), this seems to be an age where the genocide of the Jewish people can be studied in its full “complexity and diversity of the human experience” (10). Whatever way a country’s curriculum demands, the teaching of the Holocaust in primary or secondary school needs to be carefully prepared (Epstein et al. 2013; Ziv, et al. 2015). The unspoken expectation is that teachers teach to “the heart as well as to the mind” (Sorin 2004, 1).

How to teach the Holocaust

As stated above, the Holocaust seems to be best taught in middle schooling; between Grades 6 and 10, when according to Kohlberg and Hersch (1977), moral reasoning progresses with cognitive development in adolescence. The topic, however, poses a challenge for many teachers, as they are often misinformed about its historical, ethical and cultural complexity (Keith 2013) and further must face their own emotional reactions. Lecomte (2001), as quoted by Epstein et al. states that “teachers often lack in-depth knowledge” (2013, 105) and might resort to textbook use as a “safe fall back” option (Keith 2013, 57). To avoid overwhelming emotional involvement for themselves and their students, teachers might employ fictional writings (Epstein et al. 2013) and disregard factual material. However, researchers warn of “oversimplification” of a multifaceted historical event (Salmons 2003, 147). They ask that children’s literature be truthful and present accurate, historical facts.

Totten (2000, as cited in Epstein et al. 2013) reports that teachers have discussed with their classes, for example, short passages from the “*Diary of Anne Frank*” (Frank 1954) or from “*I Have Not Seen A Butterfly Around Here*” (Frankova & Povolna 2011) [poems written by children in Terezin during the Holocaust years]. These are usually accompanied by fictional videos, posters and excerpts from survivor reports. Danks (1996) encourages teachers to use survivor literature, like Elie Wiesel’s story and poem, “*Night*” which, according to Danks, “presents at least four journeys, a geographical one, a historical one, Wiesel’s relationship with his father and Wiesel’s own journey with his personal faith” (101/102). Teachers tend to assume that students will identify with the victims and empathise with their plight (Epstein et al. 2013).

Finding appropriate teaching material can be a problem, as a thoughtful search depends on teachers' assessment of their students' intellectual and emotional levels. Various Holocaust teaching material can be obtained from 'Resources for Educators — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Teacher Resources - Centre for Holocaust Education and from Teacher Resources - Sydney Jewish Museum'. However, as Keith declares, these might require from two to 20 hours to complete (2013). He proposes for busy teachers to use short biographical cards, developed by the United States Holocaust Memorial (USHMM), which in one lesson give students an impression of the diverse fates of different Jewish people at various times during this historical era. This would be in agreement with Salmons' position (2003), which urges teachers not to forget that each of the six million Jewish people was more than a number; each had a unique story. An excellent compilation of suitable teaching material, including web links, can be found in the article by Wilson and Kahn (2008) on the use of poetry when teaching about the Holocaust in middle school.

It is suggested that, prior to teaching the Holocaust in modern multicultural societies, teachers acknowledge that there may be students in their classes who might have come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and could also have experienced horrific events in the past (Salmons 2003). Provision could be made within the school system for the guidance officer to be prepared to offer counselling support for affected students.

Franklin (2011) calls for literature to set "an imaginative access to past events, together with new and different ways of understanding them that are unavailable to strictly factual forms of writing" (as cited in Epstein et al. 2013, 107). This statement is in agreement with Zak's research (2013), which explains that stories, when personal and emotional, are better remembered than mere facts, because they involve more parts of the brain. The following poem, developed out of the first author's research into the background of the Terezin children's drawings, engages students' imagination to empathise as "the act of imagination...is an act of empathy" (Franklin 2011 as cited in Epstein et al. 2013, 107).

Suggestions for teaching the Holocaust in Grades 6 – 10

The above review suggests the need for additional, imaginative ways to teach the Holocaust to students. As a prototype, the first author created a poem based on Holocaust facts; to show the life of a fictitious girl growing up in the Terezin ghetto, 1941 -1945. The poem was based

on an article by Richardson (2003), "*Looking Jewish*". Richardson discusses her own "life experiences and strategies ...as a bi-racial/ethnic/cultural/sexual person". In Jewish law, a child born to a Jewish mother is considered Jewish, but children born to a Jewish father are only considered Jewish if the mother is also Jewish (Janowski 2016). Richardson, however, states that although she has a Jewish mother, people do not recognise her as Jewish and her "looks and identity do not map onto a sociological category" (815). In this poem, similar problems are faced by Hannah, an eleven-year-old, half-Jewish child.

When teaching the poem, teachers could start by having children read the poem quietly, then one reading aloud, followed by discussions. Further on, different verses could be read in a chorus with several students. Children and teachers might then write their own verses or draw their impressions.

In each verse, students are given snapshots of Hannah's life:

Terezin Reflections

1) Do I look Christian or rather Atheist?

Was there Jewishness in my gene?

Would someone have put my name on a list

To be sent- a tiny wheel in a machine-

To Terezin?

2) Forced into the "Schleuse" trembling I stand

In a sea of confused, constrained people,

Lonely clutching my suitcase in hand...

Through the gate I can glimpse the steeple

Of Terezin.

3) "The Kristalnacht made people run wild"

My Jewish mother said: "Let's go away".

My headstrong father countered mild:

"We are German. We can stay..."

Around Terezin"

4) In school one day I was taunted!

“You don’t look like a Jew!”

This cruel memory has haunted

My dark nights too

In Terezin.

5) I proudly recited the holy “Shabbat” blessing

And pleaded for the secret to stay,

But propaganda made them transgressing:

That night they took my mother away

Outside Terezin

6) There is hunger, disease, starvation living here.

The hearse today did not bring any bread

Watched by the Exhausted with fear,

But took away dead bodies instead

Behind Terezin.

7) My diary does not answer the questions asked!

Which culture made me a target of hate?

Whatever happened in our religious past?

What will be my fate

At Terezin?

8) Your name is “Hannah” my ‘friends’ said.

You are blue-eyed, tall, blond and of Aryan race-

You are not Jewish. “How can I forget?”

Would I be called ‘Christian’ in a different place

Than Terezin?

9) At night the spider of sadness spins
In the darkness of the ghetto wall
Then the soft voice of my mother wins
Over the darkest thoughts of all
About Terezin.

10) On Tuesdays and Thursdays only, Friedl calls
For us to paint free-
Opening up the walls
For imagination to see
Beyond Terezin

11) The train's rhythmic rattle deadens my fear
As my heart clings to life, I pray
People in striped pyjamas, so many are here
Is "Sho-ah" whirling us away
From Terezin?
(Haring 2015)

This poem incorporates repetition and rhyme. For example, the first line of the poem contains seven words. The last line repeats a refrain with different prepositions, showing that Terezin is the focus. Terezin was considered the 'showcase' of ghettos; a 'model prison' especially 'beautified' by the SS [Schutzstaffel, Protection Squad; Yad Vashem. The Holocaust Resource Center. Lexicon A-Z.] for visits of the Red Cross (Stargardt 1998; Brush 2004). Further, the poem is written in rhyme to make it easier to remember. "Musical elements [rhythm and regularity] help to make the poem more memorable... Since poems were traditionally spoken; a poem had to 'stick' in the mind ..." (Moustaki 2001, 88). The rhyme follows the pattern of: AB AB C in each verse.

Meter, which is similar to our heartbeat, is a feature of this poem. It is often used in nursery rhymes and songs (Moustaki 2001). "Meter [is] the regular pattern of rhythm in a verse" (Hamilton & Livingston 1983). Further, the poem contains examples of alliteration, such as: "*the train's rhythmic rattle*"; and metaphor: "*the spider of darkness*"-relating to being caught in a net of depression.

Flashbacks, such as, “*Forced into the “Schleuse’ trembling I stand”*, give impressions of life in Terezin. They speak of relocation away from home to a place of liminality: security and stability are lost. Hannah, thinking about her fate, intuitively feels threatened: “*lonely clutching my suitcase in hand”*. This refers to a child’s suitcase found in Terezin bearing the name ‘Hana’ (Levine 2003).

The “Schleuse” is ‘the sluice’ where people are sorted into old and young; unable to work or healthy and strong; capable of toiling in the fields or factories. German Jews had felt secure because of their German nationality, however they were deceived; told that they were travelling to a holiday resort. Instead, Terezin was a ‘waiting station’ towards the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Living conditions were appalling (“*There is hunger, disease, starvation living here”*) and thousands of people died of Diphtheria. This would have been a further trauma for a young child.

One of the major themes of the poem is ‘Identity’. In the first verse, Hannah questions her identity. One important point deals with being of Jewish descent, which brought individual people to the mass genocide of the Holocaust. To make students aware of stereotyping, teachers could use these questions as a starting point for a discussion, such as “What does being Jewish look like?” This could lead to students questioning their own genetic makeup; whether it could have contained “Jewishness” (“*Was there Jewishness in my gene?”*) and if, therefore, they would have been eliminated in the Holocaust. In fact the genocide of the Jewish people was run like a machine; indifferent to individual people, their age, nationality or profession.

Another theme is the experience of guilt and deceit. Hannah has a very close connection to her mother. She feels responsible for her mother’s transportation and probable death in Auschwitz. Childlike, Hannah had trusted her friends in school and recited the Sabbath blessing to prove that she was Jewish (“*And pleaded for the secret to stay”*). She now thinks she has profaned these important words and that with this action she denounced her mother. However, remembering her mother’s voice gives her comfort during depressing moments

“At night the spider of sadness spins”--- “In the darkness of the ghetto wall”... “Then the soft voice of my mother wins”... “Over the darkest thoughts of all”).

A further theme relates to problems of adolescence. Hannah writes, *“My diary does not answer the questions asked”*. Hannah would have been in need of an adult adviser. Her thoughts turn around questions of the meaning of her life in Terezin, depression, also suicide *“the darkest thoughts of all”* and her love of life (similar to Anne Frank). As a comfort, she is looking forward to Dicker-Brandeis’ painting lessons, where she can experience a ‘timeless state of flow’ and feel freed from the walls of Terezin. Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was a well-known artist and teacher. She perished in Auschwitz together with her students (Leshnoff 2006). Creative teachers can no doubt find other ways to utilise this poem in their teaching of the Holocaust. Overall, the poem adds to current resources and could be used with other multimedia resources.

Conclusion

The authors of this article have attempted, through document analysis, to find answers to the why, when and how to teach the Holocaust. It has been found that there are no definite answers. Most researchers agree that the Holocaust should be taught out of reverence for the six million Jewish people – adults and children, who lost their lives. Teachers can point out stereotypical thinking to students, and how racist ideas can influence individuals and society. However, researchers advise against using the example of the Holocaust solely to teach moral and ethical issues. They conclude that children must be taught about other cultures and especially the Jewish culture in order to ‘understand’ what happened, to be able for themselves to decide on appropriate ethical decisions. To achieve this objective, students must have gained some insight into human behaviour and reactions, and this begins during adolescence. To avoid trauma, teachers have to be extremely careful how they select material or present the Holocaust to the students in their care. It therefore needs to be carefully considered as to whether kindergarten or primary students should be taught about the Holocaust. Future research could examine how poetry such as this poem engages students’ imagination and how effective this poem is in teaching students about the Holocaust.

It is hoped that the poem presented here will start student discussions about many topics concerning the Holocaust. Suggestions for teaching, together with the poem itself, may help students to find some answers to this historical disaster.

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