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CONTEXT IS KEY. A STUDY OF PRIMARY-AGE CHILDREN'S LEARNING WITH TESTIMONIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

In 1995, *The National Holocaust Centre and Museum* (hereafter the Centre) opened in the UK. It is the only centre dedicated to Holocaust remembrance and education in the UK. It plays a unique role as a memorial, a museum, and a place of testimony and of learning. Every year more than 20,000 school-age pupils engage with and learn about the Holocaust. At the heart of the learning programmes lie the testimonies of the survivors who speak at the Centre on a daily basis. There are wide ranging debates within academia as to what constitutes "testimony". For the purposes of this research testimony is defined as first-hand accounts shared by survivors of Nazi persecution and the Holocaust. This narrow definition has been adopted as survivors and their first-hand accounts are central to the learning programmes delivered at the Centre. The findings that form the basis of this paper were shaped by previous research commissioned by the Centre between 2012 and 2015. This examined the extent to which engagement with the Centre's learning programme influenced the attitudes and behaviours of 750 primary-age children towards people perceived to be different due to disability, gender, race or religion. The research found that engagement with the Centre's learning programme positively influenced children's attitudes and provided opportunities for learning about the Holocaust (Sorton 2015). This programme comprised four key interventions: educator-facilitated activities, a visit to the exhibition *The Journey,* opportunity to listen to the live testimony of a survivor and use of video testimony (VT).

However, the research did not provide any indication as to which, if any, of the interventions within the programme had the biggest impact on the children's learning and their resultant positive change in attitudes. This paper shares the findings from the latest research undertaken by the Centre, which sought to understand more fully the value to be placed on videotaped testimony, as opposed to the other educational interventions, in helping primary school children learn about "difference" while also developing their knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. In learning about difference, pupils were asked to consider their attitudes and behaviour towards others they might perceive as different. As the pupils studied were of primary school age, their learning and understanding of the Holocaust focuses on events in 1938 and the Kindertransport scheme, as opposed to events that started in mid-1941 and which form the accepted definition of the Holocaust.

As part of this wider consideration the research set out to:

1. evaluate the comparative impact of each of the programme's interventions – namely educator-facilitated activities, the use of the exhibition *The Journey*, the sharing in person of a testimony by a survivor, and the use of video testimony – had on helping pupils to learn about difference and the Holocaust;
2. determine to what extent the use of videotaped testimonies is foundational, or critical, to the effectiveness of the programme;
3. examine which aspects of best practice in the use of videotaped testimonies is most effective in learning programmes aiming to influence the attitudes and behaviours of primary-age children towards people of difference and their learning about the Holocaust.

Constructing Pupils' Learning

In learning about difference, pupils were asked to consider their attitudes and behaviour towards others whose identities might lead pupils to perceive them as "different". This challenge is a central element of the learning programmes of the Centre, and is cited by many survivors as an aspect of their

decision to speak about their experiences. For example, Robert Norton states:

> I also talk to schoolchildren about my life. I hope that my experiences will help them understand the importance of being tolerant of other people and their differences. (cited in Whitworth 2009: 145)

To enable consideration of attitudes towards the social identity of others, pupils completed a series of educator-facilitated activities in a pre-visit workshop that encourages them to consider issues of identity and belonging. Based on George Hein's theory of *Constructivist Learning* (1991), the activities provide pupils with the opportunity to learn about aspects of their own identity and their place within their own community. Each pupil was given the opportunity to construct their own knowledge and make meaning from it. The knowledge developed during the pre-visit workshop provided the pupils with a frame of reference when they visited the exhibition, *The Journey*. This allowed them to begin to make meaning from the story of Leo Stein – a 10-year-old German Jewish boy living in Berlin and facing persecution during the Nazi regime. His isolation and persecution, founded on rejection because of his Jewish identity, was contextualised by prior learning about the complexity, importance and inherent individuality of identity. It could be argued that the constructivist principles of learning in a museum, referred to by Hein, have been borne out when the pupils say that, after hearing live testimony, the role of the educator was pivotal in learning about difference. After examining the importance of identity, pupils learn from the narrative of Leo. It enables them to reflect more fully on the impact of Leo's rejection because of his identity. Pupils were also able to develop greater clarity about the links to their own identities and communities, and how they interact within them.

The Learning Programme *Our Lonely Journey*

The learning programme consisted of three elements that took place over three weeks. During the first week, pupils participated in a five-hour

workshop at their school, consisting of a series of educator-facilitated activities that provided them with the opportunity to consider issues of identity and belonging. During the second week, pupils made a four-hour visit to the Centre, including a two-hour educator-led programme through the exhibition, *The Journey,* and the opportunity to listen to the testimony of a survivor of the Holocaust and ask her or him questions. The exhibition explores issues of identity, belonging and loss. During the final week of the programme, the pupils took part in a five-hour workshop in their school again, looking at the experiences of Jewish Kindertransportees coming to the UK in 1938–39. Before the learning programme was delivered, it was analysed to ensure inclusion of the four interventions:

- educator-facilitated activities, for example, "What would you do if …?"
- the exhibition *The Journey*
- videotaped survivor testimonies
- live survivor testimony

The activities undertaken by the pupils during the learning programme were mapped against the four interventions to provide the following coverage:

Table 1: % of activities to support learning about difference

Intervention	% of activities
Educator-facilitated activities	37.5
The Journey exhibition	31.3
Videotaped survivor testimonies	25
Live survivor testimony	6.2

Table 2: % of activities to support learning about the Holocaust

Intervention	% of activities
Educator-facilitated activities	16.7
The Journey exhibition	41.7
Videotaped survivor testimonies	33.3
Live survivor testimony	8.3

Methods

The research was carried out with 41 Year 5 pupils (aged 9 to 10) from one UK primary school over three weeks in November 2016. The study followed a mixed methods approach. Each student was given a "reflections journal" and at the end of each element of the programme (pre-visit, visit and post-visit) was asked to reflect on the activities, and to rank in order of importance the three activities that had helped them to learn the most about difference and the Holocaust. They were also given the opportunity to explain in writing why they had picked their first choice activity. To avoid bias, the pupils were not aware that the activities had been mapped against the four interventions. In addition, six focus groups of three pupils each were held after each element of the programme had been completed. Focus group interviews [n=2] were also held to provide pupils with the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and talk about the activities they had found most effective in helping them to learn. Pupils were also asked to explain if they felt the video testimonies of survivors had been beneficial to how much they had learned, and to consider how using videotaped testimonies could be improved to better support learning.

Methodology

The decision to adopt a combined qualitative/quantitative approach was influenced by the works of Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss, who advocate "methodological pragmatism" (Wellington 2000: 23). Furthermore, Claudia Mincemoyer and Joan Thomson (1998: 2) view "qualitative data [as providing] depth and detail". Additionally, to increase the credibility of our findings, the combined approach allowed for a greater number of methods to be used to collect and ultimately triangulate the data. Louis Cohen et al. (2007: 341) claim that journals have "limited flexibility of response". However, this limitation was overcome by providing open-ended comment sections throughout the journal, which enabled pupils to enrich the research data. The focus group interviews provided an opportunity to explore in further detail the data gathered from the journals. In particular, issues were raised

regarding the importance of listening to a Holocaust survivor in person. The interviews provided the opportunity to delve deeper, to understand why listening to a speaker in person as opposed to watching a videotaped testimony helped pupils learn more about difference and the Holocaust.

The full programme contained 16 activities that supported learning about difference and 12 that supported learning about the Holocaust. The data was analysed against the two learning outcomes – learning about difference and learning about the Holocaust. For each learning outcome the pupils' first choice activity scored three, the second scored two and the third one point. The overall score of each activity was then transferred to the intervention it had been mapped against when the programme was analysed. The total score of each of the four interventions was then divided by the number of activities that had been mapped against that intervention, to create an overall score for each. This overall score permitted the interventions to be ranked according to the value the pupils put on them.

Findings

When learning about difference, pupils overwhelmingly highlighted the opportunity to listen to a Holocaust survivor give their testimony in person. The role of the educator was ranked below this, followed by the immersive experience gained from exhibition, and finally the experience of engaging with videotaped testimonies. When learning about the Holocaust, pupils once again referred overwhelmingly to the opportunity to listen to a Holocaust survivor speaking in person. However, in contrast to learning about difference, the pupils ranked videotaped testimonies as the second most important intervention helping them to learn about the Holocaust, followed by the exhibition and then the educator-facilitated activities. In reflecting on the importance of listening to a survivor give their testimony in person, pupils referred to their unique role in sharing their experiences during the Holocaust. One pupil stated: "He told us what his life was like during Second World War and there are not many people who lived through it. He was picked on because he was Jewish and not many of us are Jewish".

This reflects the perspective of some Holocaust survivors that, despite the need for other sources, theirs is a unique role as witnesses to the events of the Holocaust. As Waxman states: "it is clear that survivors such as Wiesel and Bitton-Jackson feel a proximity to the events of the Holocaust that clearly demarcates them from the historians who were not." (cited in Stone 2004: 499) The findings from the pupil evaluations were surprising in two respects. Teachers often say how effective the exhibition *The Journey* is as an engaging resource. It was, therefore, interesting that pupils ranked the educator's role above it in helping them to learn about difference. Similarly, it was interesting that pupils ranked video testimony above the exhibition in supporting their learning about the Holocaust.

Contextualising Survivors' Videotaped Testimony

For both the live and the videotaped testimony, pupils continually referred to the role of the survivors as having been present during and surviving the persecution of the Holocaust. Their comments commonly reflected the understanding that "he/she was there". In reflecting on the effectiveness of videotaped testimonies in supporting their learning, pupils' empathetic responses suggested the affectiveness of testimony. Although their comments reflected that they were aware of the limitations of those testimonies, for example, the inability to ask questions, they still remarked on the impact of the testimonies being shared; one pupil stated that "from their stories, I learnt how sad things can be". Caroline Wake, in examining the role of viewers of videotaped testimonies, raises the possibility of the role of "tertiary witnesses". Wake suggests that the "theory of hypermediate tertiary witnessing considers the possibility that spectators do not experience spatiotemporal copresence, because they remain conscious of the medium, but nevertheless experience emotional copresence." (2013: 129) It might be asked whether pupils felt videotaped testimony was important for learning about the Holocaust simply because of the affective power of the excerpts. However, this is not supported by the lower placement of video testimony in developing understanding of difference. Instead, it could be argued that pupils' understanding of the

videotaped testimonies in describing the experiences of children who left on the Kindertransport, as part of the post-visit workshop, has been contextualised from the narrative of Leo. This has implications for the use of video testimony excerpts within learning programmes. It suggests that for their significance to be understood, excerpts need to be contextualised before being shared. In this case, the contextualisation occurred through a strong proceeding narrative, which enabled younger children to reflect on the significance of what was being lost through the experiences they were hearing about. It could be questioned whether perhaps pupils placed more importance on video testimony as this had been further contextualised by listening to a survivor sharing their testimony in person. By witnessing the impact of the events of the Holocaust on an individual physically present, pupils may have been able to appreciate more fully the excerpts of testimony later shared in VT.

Conclusion

The research findings presented in this paper overwhelmingly highlight the importance placed by pupils on listening to the testimony of a survivor in person and the ability to engage with their story. Physical presence creates a bond between two individuals and clearly elevates this experience when affording value to learning interventions. The centrality of the importance of testimony shared by "someone who was there" raises questions concerning best practice in relation to video testimonies – as survivors become less able to speak and the role of video testimony becomes increasingly critical. Pupils were questioned as to their reflections on best practice in using VT. Their responses were in relation to asking questions about the survivor's testimony and enhancing the tangibility of the experience of listening to the testimony. Both of these aspects make clear that pupils were seeking in some way to make a connection with the survivor who was not physically present. It can be questioned whether this was of more importance to this cohort as they had listened to a survivor in person or whether some aspect or ability to connect is of central importance for testimony to continue to have impact when survivors can no longer speak in person.

However, of greater interest is the value pupils place on video testimony and their reflections on how video testimony can be used within future educational programmes. Although pupils ranked VT second in importance among the four interventions for learning about the Holocaust, their reflections on its importance focused heavily on one aspect: empathetic rather than knowledge-based learning. Pupils shared few specific details of individual testimonies – their understanding focused on conceptual and empathetic reflections. As the initial contextualisation did not focus on pre-war Jewish life, or further historical context, perhaps a more specific and comprehensive chronological and knowledge-based contextualisation is needed to further develop historical learning. It may also be interesting to consider further the use of other sources in conjunction with video testimonies. To what extent is it the role of testimony to enlarge knowledge of particular key events, or does its educational value lie elsewhere? If the role of video testimony is to enable pupils to gain a better understanding of the impact of the Holocaust on individuals, it is evident that pupils identified its significance in this respect. If, however, the role of video testimony should also incorporate the developing of knowledge and understanding of key historical events within the Holocaust, the effectiveness of video testimonies in enabling this was not borne out in the pupils' evaluation.

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