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‘Why are we learning this?’ Does studying the Holocaust encourage better citizenship values?: preliminary findings from Scotland.

Abstract:

The relationship between learning about the Holocaust and the development of positive values may seem common sense but in reality there is a complex level of development and understanding. This research (which was sponsored by the Scottish Government) was designed to ascertain whether learning about the Holocaust impacts on young people’s general citizenship values and attitudes; does learning about the Holocaust allow them to extrapolate from the events of the Holocaust to present day issues, such as racism and discrimination. The research followed a cohort of approximately 100 pupils (aged 11-12) who had studied the Holocaust and compared their values one year later both in comparison to their earlier attitudes and compared to their peers who had not studied the Holocaust. This paper reports the findings. As we might expect, the results were not always as predicted, particularly when it came to the pupils understanding of anti-Semitism or genocide; in general though, our core group had maintained more positive values than they had before their lessons on the Holocaust and were more positive than their peers.

Introduction

Education on its own cannot be a panacea for racism in general and anti-Semitism in particular. Nonetheless, there has been some evidence in Britain that learning about the

Holocaust can have a positive impact on the outlook of young peopleⁱ. The Holocaust has been taught piecemeal in Scottish primary and secondary schools for many years, depending on the individual initiative of the teacher, but the introduction of Holocaust Memorial Day in 2001 has made its teaching more mainstream and easier. In curricular terms, this was because the announcement of UK Holocaust Memorial Day was accompanied by the commissioning of curricular materials for teaching Holocaust history to primary pupils aged 10-11 yearsⁱⁱ and a separate resource for secondary schoolsⁱⁱⁱ, which were later distributed to every primary school in Scotland for preparation for the first commemorative event. Both resources make links with contemporary manifestation of racism, prejudice and discrimination. The Scottish Executive has continued to fund Holocaust curricular materials^{iv}.

The content of these curricular resources share a strong focus on the areas of knowledge and understanding relevant to the development of active and responsible citizenship. Currently a national priority, 'Values and Citizenship' involves teaching pupils 'duties and responsibilities of citizenship in democratic society' and 'respect for self and one another'^v. Further, the Education for Citizenship proposals^{vi} implemented from August 2003, has added impetus to the development of teaching about the Holocaust in schools. As in England and Wales, the proposal is for education for citizenship to be an entitlement for all pupils at all stages. However, in Scotland, due to the cross curricular scope of 5-14, the existence of Modern Studies in the secondaries, the development of Social Subjects in Environmental Studies in the primaries, and the incorporation of 'responsible citizenship' in the Curriculum for Excellence proposals^{vii}, citizenship is not a separate subject but is taught in a cross-curricular approach. Despite some fears that the

responsibility of all can become the responsibility of none, the suggestion is that many subjects will have an input into education for citizenship.

In this citizenship agenda, the Holocaust is only mentioned as an example of the kinds of teaching content that could be employed and the desire to develop positive attitudes towards other cultures, faiths and ethnic groups, means that a study of the worst genocide in history can be an important part of a child's development. Teaching about the Holocaust provides a suitable context for attainment in many key areas which are specified in proposals for Education for Citizenship in Scotland, eg. human rights, the need for mutual respect, tolerance and understanding of a diverse and multicultural Scotland.

As a result of these curricular developments, governmental and local authority support and research into its teaching, Scottish teachers of the upper primary and lower secondary stages now have more opportunities to teach the Holocaust and greater accessibility to Holocaust teaching resources than before. Further, there is an additional 20% flexibility time that allows schools to enhance the time for a curricular area where they consider the minimum time insufficient and where school and the local authority have development priorities.

However, we must remain aware that while education policy might stress positive issues such as understanding, empathy and tolerance, there can be a countervailing impact of other policy areas, such as economic and housing policies, holding of terrorist suspects

and scaremongering (for example about numbers of refugees). In fact it can lead to opposite effects than the education policy agenda.

These countervailing issues have meant that despite increased education in the area, there are some worrying signs of increases in anti-Semitism, particularly in Europe^{viii} with the Community Security Trust reporting that in 2006 there was the highest ever total of 594 incidents in Britain, of which 16 were reported in Scotland and in 2007 the second highest ever, 547. Further, there are some disturbing changes in the pattern of anti-Semitic activities in that there has been a greatly increased number of violent assaults and a large increase in damages and desecration to property, with 2007 showing the highest ever number of violent assaults; indeed, these violent assaults make up an increasing proportion of anti-Semitic incidents in the UK, from 13 per cent of the total in 2002, up to 21 per cent in 2007^{ix}. It is important not to overstate the level of this and it does not equate to the racism faced by some other ethnic minorities. There are some worrying cases of continued neo-Nazi violence in these reports, but also there is debate of a new form of anti-Semitism in which acts of anti-Jewish hostility are related to events in the Middle East.

School Based Holocaust Education

In responding to pedagogical issues such as Piaget's theories of children's intellectual and moral development that suggest that children are unable to abstract and satisfactorily understand this kind of topic, Short cites a number of Piaget's critics who have

influenced teachers to raise their expectations of children's abilities^x. The contribution of Holocaust education in the primary school includes developing pupils' understanding of justice, stereotyping and discrimination^{xi} and provides opportunities for developing positive values of empathy, awareness of antiracism, and an understanding that the individual can make a difference.

A contrasting viewpoint is conveyed by Totten on the grounds that the Holocaust is inappropriate and too complex for this age group to study^{xii}, and by Kochan who objects to its teaching to the 'immature and unsophisticated' claiming that such teaching can have deleterious consequences for pupils^{xiii}. The former viewpoint is challenged by Cowan and Maitles's case study of an educational authority's response to Holocaust Memorial Day in which Holocaust teaching was the norm for the upper primary classes, i.e. 10-12 years, and where a variety of appropriate curricular teaching materials and staff development were provided by the local authority^{xiv}. The latter viewpoint is challenged by this paper together with its phase 1 study that suggested that teaching the Holocaust has a positive short term impact on pupils' values and attitudes^{xv}. In this paper, which presents some of the findings from three surveys, it is suggested that evidence exists that further supports the teaching of the Holocaust to upper primary pupils.

Previous research in secondary schools^{xvi} provides evidence that Holocaust education can make a significant contribution to citizenship in developing pupils' awareness of human rights issues and genocides, the concepts of stereotyping and scapegoating, and general political literacy, such as the exercise of power in local, national and global contexts. Landau asserts that Holocaust teaching 'perhaps more effectively than any other subject,

has the power to sensitise them (pupils) to the dangers of indifference, intolerance, racism and the dehumanisation of others'^{xvii}. Short asserts that one of the lessons that the Holocaust teaches pupils is that pupil attitudes are, 'to some extent, culturally determined' and its teaching should encourage pupils to examine whether any harmful stereotypes may emanate from an aspect of their culture^{xviii}.

Holocaust education is part of the English National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 (S1/2 Scottish equivalent age group; 12-14 years of age) and there are current debates as to its effectiveness. In particular, Russell suggests that history teachers are inconsistent in their methodologies as some teach it as history while others focus on the social and moral perspectives without applying historical inquiry^{xix}. In Scotland, as we pointed out^{xx}, although there are plenty of opportunities in the curriculum for teaching about the Holocaust, too often 'Holocaust teaching in Scotland depends on individual school policy, and/or interested teachers' who integrate it into modes of the curriculum. Although the Holocaust is not included specifically in the Scottish curriculum, the '5-14 National Guidelines' or the new Curriculum for Excellence, there is plenty of scope and flexibility within this curriculum for teaching it. Traditional curricular areas are Religious and Moral Education, Environmental Studies and Personal and Social Development.

There is a further issue relating to the whole nature of the raising of controversial issues in schools. In primary schools there is a perceived lack of teacher subject knowledge.^{xxi} Paradoxically, in secondary schools the IEA study of political consciousness in 28 European countries (Torny-Purta et al, 2001) found that in many countries teachers are afraid to tackle controversial issues because, almost by definition, the discussion becomes

multi-disciplinary and they are uncomfortable in that zone. However, in analyzing how high school students understood the place of classroom discussion, Hahn found that students in Netherlands did not try to persuade each other, even when discussing highly controversial issues that they felt strongly about, whereas in German and US state schools and English private schools there was strong argument and persuasion. Interestingly, she found that there was virtually no discussion on political issues in the state sector in England even in social science classes where she gathered that ‘the primary purpose was to prepare for examinations’^{xxii}. There are other general issues involved affecting both school sectors which mitigate against the discussion of controversial issues. Firstly, there are teacher worries about their skills to handle open-ended discussions which they might not be able to control or direct. For example, there has been a report of one school whose history department ‘avoided selecting the Holocaust as a topic for GCSE coursework for fear of confronting anti-Semitic sentiment and Holocaust denial among some Muslim pupils’^{xxiii}; secondly, there are structural constraints in schools from the lack of tradition in discussion to the physical layout of classrooms; thirdly, there are worries about what parents might think about controversial discussion, and the influence of the mass media and politicians to what might be perceived as influencing pupils one way or another. Nowhere is this more problematic in Scotland, Northern Ireland and parts of England than over an issue such as sectarianism and/or the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Smith raises a further question: can a concept of citizenship ‘based on equal rights and a shared sense of belonging... moderate, transcend or displace identity politics and concepts of nationality?’^{xxiv} And, as if this isn’t problematic enough, there is the point of limitations to compromise and consensus. Learning in this area suggests to pupils that

there is not always a compromise available no matter how hard we try and it is this inability that leads to the kind of violent scenes we see on our TV screens and, sometimes, on our streets. This itself is a valuable lesson and can be extrapolated to other conflicts (such as the war in Iraq) across the world. The role of the teacher in this becomes crucial. As has been suggested,^{xxv} the teacher needs to be confident enough and have the honesty and confidence to suggest to pupils that he/she is not just an independent observer but has a point of view, which also can and should be challenged. Although this is an area of continuing discussion and debate in Britain, Wrigley points out^{xxvi} that in Germany, teachers are encouraged to allow discussion around controversial issues, present a wide range of views and be open about their own standpoint whilst allowing for all views to be challenged. In the very slim curriculum guidelines in Denmark, teachers are encouraged not to ‘overplan’ so that, in discussion with their pupils, issues deemed relevant for discussion can be included. Indeed, it is crucial, according to Ashton and Watson that teachers understand their pro-active role, where necessary, otherwise backward ideas can dominate the discussion.^{xxvii} Further, teachers have to gently point out that these issues being discussed have not yet been resolved and are open-ended in terms of outcome. Pupils have little problem with this and are not as dogmatic as adults when it comes to changing attitudes and political understanding.

Methodology

To investigate the value of Holocaust education, a longitudinal strategy was devised to examine whether there are ‘immediate’ and ‘lasting’ effects on the attitudes and dispositions of pupils that result from its teaching; further, the values of this cohort was to

be compared to their peers who did not have the opportunity to study the Holocaust in primary school. This will provide empirical evidence of the contribution of Holocaust education in developing attitudes relating to citizenship.

This small scale study involved some 100 pupils in Primary 7 (aged 11-12 years) and a total of 238 pupils in Secondary 1 (aged 12-13 years). In order to avoid aspects of familiarity, to move beyond the multicultural areas most often used in the studies on this area and to explore issues such as attitudes towards Gypsy Travellers and Jews, a small rural local authority some 30 miles from Glasgow was chosen for the study. The school sample was chosen, in collaboration with the local authority, who identified two primary schools in the area that taught the Holocaust as part of the World War Two topic in Primary. One primary is a one streamed school (school A); the other is a larger school that contained pupils from three classes (school B). Both primaries are non-denominational, have mixed socio-economic catchment areas, are predominantly white and have no Jewish pupils. Class sizes were similar in both schools.

In consultation with the schools and local authority, a survey was devised which attempted to ascertain changes in some of the values and attitudes outlined as central to national documentation on citizenship.^{xxviii} The survey was issued before and immediately after the lessons on the Holocaust, in November 2004 and March 2005, to investigate the immediate effect of Holocaust education on pupils' values and attitudes (Surveys 1 and 2).

We followed this cohort ten months later into the secondary school and issued survey 3 to compare pupils' attitudes with earlier findings. This survey was also issued to secondary pupils who had not previously studied the Holocaust to compare their attitudes with that of the core group. This fitted in with teachers' forward planning of Holocaust teaching and meant that the impact of the media leading up to national Holocaust Memorial Day could not influence the findings. It is worth noting that the number of anti-Semitic incidents reported in the UK during this period rose from 375 (2004) to 532 (2005).^{xxix}

We summarized the results of the first stage of our findings^{xxx} as:

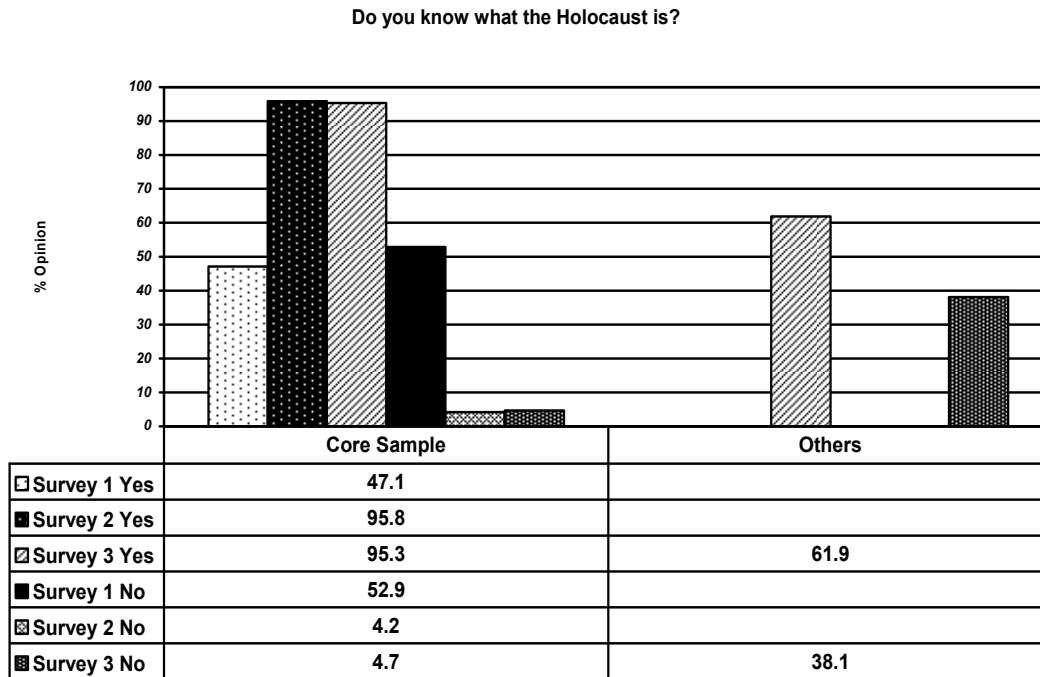
It is important not to take too much from the first stage of this study. There is evidence that pupils' knowledge and values/attitudes improved (excepting pupils' attitudes towards English people) after their learning about the Holocaust. At the very least, numbers of pupils who put 'don't know' for survey1 came off the fence in survey 2 and came down in favour of tolerance and understanding. Yet, surprisingly few (only 28.3% overall) knew (or thought they knew) what anti-Semitism was. Analysis of the ways in which teachers in our schools put the Holocaust in the citizenship context is likely to contribute to an understanding of this. For example, did teachers teach the Holocaust as a specific topic linked to genocide or as an example of racism per se? In terms of our general aims, the first stage suggests that there are some significant immediate benefits of learning the Holocaust; the longer lasting effects are yet to be ascertained and will be done so following our third survey.

It is to this final point that we now turn. We obtained findings based on many more questions than we report in this paper. Our principal interest at this stage of the study was to find out if the general improvements in knowledge and positive values and attitudes of the pupils after their learning about the Holocaust were maintained in the first year of secondary education; and, secondly, whether these pupils' understanding of the Holocaust and positive attitudes in aspects of citizenship, were similar or different to their peers who did not have an opportunity to study the Holocaust in their primary school.

Findings and Discussion

In terms of their own self understanding, Table 1 shows that the core sample (those pupils who learned about the Holocaust in primary) maintained their perception of their knowledge of the Holocaust and it was substantially higher than the others (their peers in primary schools that did not teach about the Holocaust). Interestingly, the fact that 61.9% of 'others' knew about the Holocaust shows that there are opportunities either through media or other lessons, or Holocaust Memorial Day activities, or parental comment for young people to find out about it; but the fact that nearly 40% didn't recognize the term or know anything about it, means that Holocaust education clearly has a role to play.

Table 1: Pupils’ perceived knowledge of the Holocaust



A similar trend can be found in terms of perceived understanding of anti-Semitism and genocide. For anti-Semitism, only 3.5% of ‘others’ could define it, whereas the core sample stayed at approximately 22%. Yet, although the core sample had a stronger understanding of it, perhaps the most significant factor is that there is such low awareness of the term overall. To investigate this further, the author interviewed the teachers concerned. The teacher in School A developed lessons on the Holocaust without mentioning ‘anti-Semitism’ per se; rather, she talked about racism towards Jews. Similarly, Short’s study of secondary students showed that their teachers were not including the critical role of anti-Semitism in their teaching of the origins of the Holocaust^{xxxii}. While the teachers claimed that pupils understood what anti-Semitism was, despite not knowing the term, it is perhaps incumbent upon teachers to mention the terminology more clearly so that pupils who come up against a media headline relating to anti-Semitism will know what it is about and relate it to their learning.

Similarly, there was a very low awareness of the meaning of genocide by the ‘others’ and indeed only 29% of core pupils considered that they understood the meaning of genocide. The findings suggest that teaching the Holocaust is a contributory factor to pupils’ understanding of genocide but only if the lessons made the links clear. Interview data showed that school B had included a lot of content on the contemporary nature of the Holocaust, making relevant links with human rights issues, introducing more recent genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur and discussing the current situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland, while school A had only touched upon it in a vague way.

These results have implications for the link between learning about the Holocaust as an historical event and contemporary issues relating to anti-Semitism and genocide. In particular, if one rationale for teaching the Holocaust in schools is to develop pupils’ knowledge of the Holocaust so that they can understand contemporary genocide,^{xxxii} the teaching methodology and making explicit links becomes crucial.

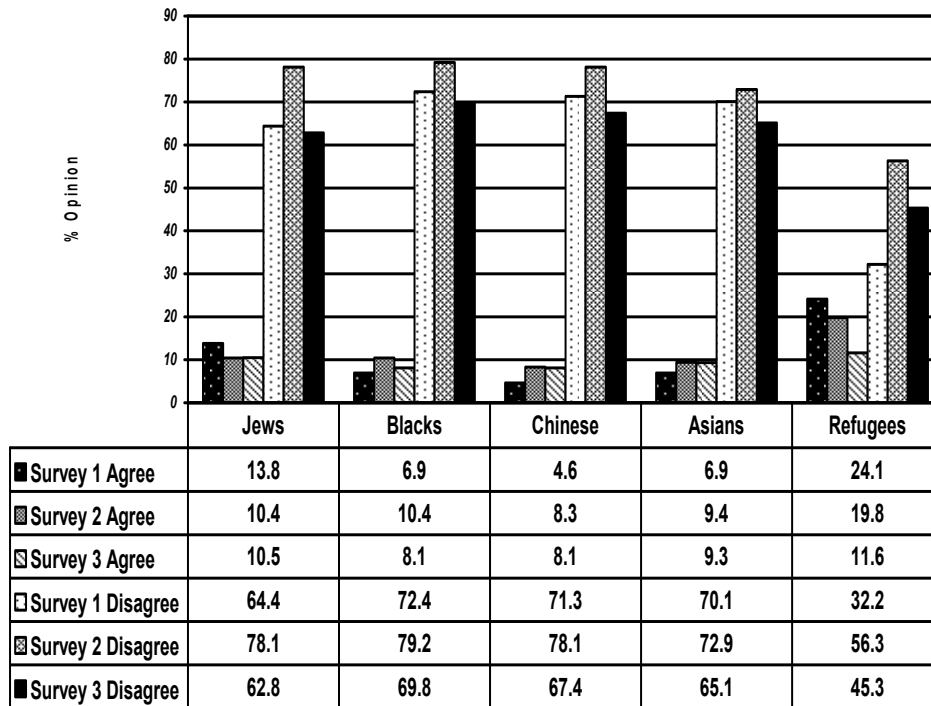
Although there was a high level of agreement about not making racist comments, there was a more variable response to the statement about there being too many of a category of people in Scotland. As Table 2 shows, pupils’ attitudes more or less held up to where they had been after the lessons on the Holocaust; nonetheless, a much larger number claimed they were unsure. Interestingly, attitudes towards refugees held up better than the other variables, although this was the category which showed the most negative attitudes overall. This area (refugees) is a current issue that was discussed in and outside the

classroom. It is unlikely that the other groups of peoples would have aroused a similar interest.

Given that more than 95% of these core pupils considered that they know what the Holocaust is (Table 1 above), and that there are approx. only 5,000 Jews in Scotland, pupils' attitudes towards Jews is rather puzzling as pupils' new knowledge has no long term positive effect on their attitudes in this area. One possible explanation may lie in pupils' understanding of anti-Semitism. It may also be that anti-Semitism is perceived as something that happened in history and is not perceived by pupils to be relevant to contemporary Scottish society. It is also possible that pupils do not perceive Jews as a minority oppressed group in today's society. What we do know is that there was little discussion on the contemporary nature of anti-Semitism. Another explanation may be found in Short's implication^{xxxiii} that successful Holocaust teaching is dependent on pupils' perceptions of Jews and Judaism and of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Data obtained from interviews showed that School A had introduced Judaism in P3 and studied another aspect of it in P7, albeit after their teaching of the Holocaust; School B had studied Judaism the previous year. This suggests that pupils' perceptions of the above will have started to have been formed but these were not examined in this research. Finally, it is feasible that the results perhaps relate to the perceived differences between prejudice and discrimination; the pupils perhaps feel that there are 'too many' minorities in Scotland but feel that there should not be any abuse towards them.

Table 2: Attitudes to number ofpeople in Scotland

Core Sample:
I think that there are too many ... in Scotland.



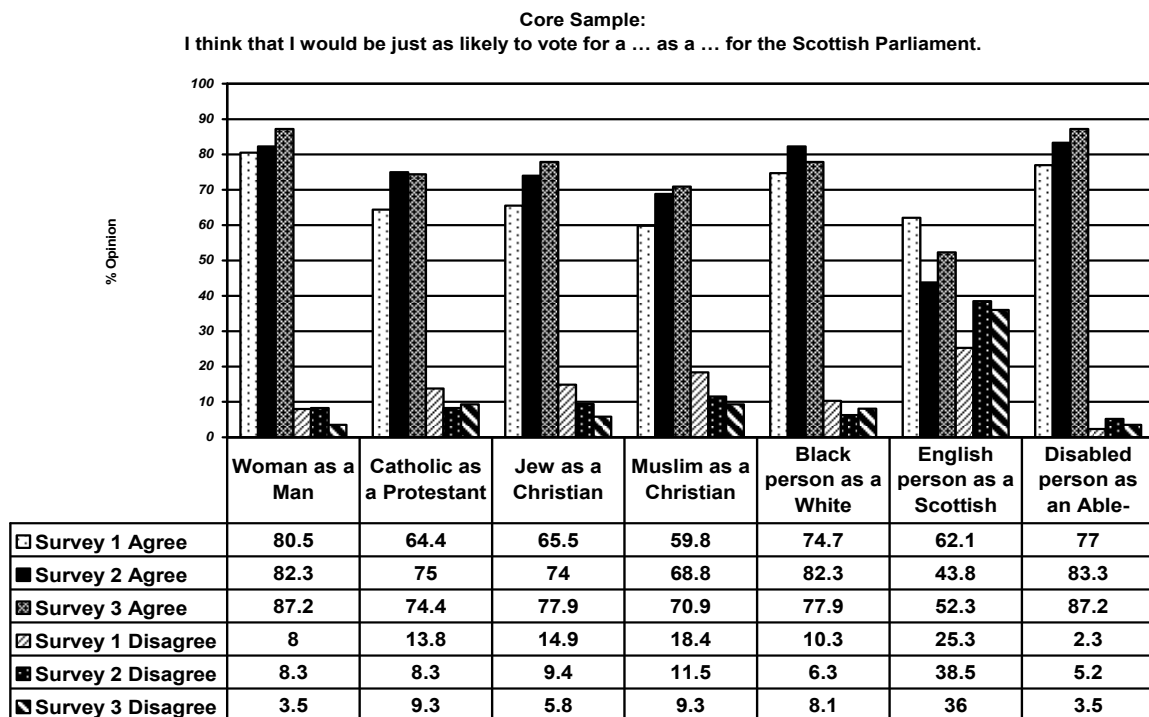
One of the most contentious areas from the first stage of the survey was the potential voting attitudes of the sample and, in particular, the attitude towards English people. It is possible that pupils may have considered the Scottish Parliament as an institution for Scottish people, irrespective of their ethnicity, and we have previously concluded that^{xxxiv}

The research uncovered some anti-English feeling – the only area that significantly declined in the course of the two questionnaires. This requires further investigation and has two significant implications for teachers. Firstly, it

raises a serious question as to whether anti-English feeling is endemic in Scottish culture. When the class teachers were notified of these results they were concerned and committed to acting upon this including it in their education for citizenship programme. Secondly, if teaching the Holocaust and racism suggests that the only victims are persecuted peoples eg. Jews, Gypsies, Tutsis, there can be a danger of ignoring prejudice against other peoples, eg. English people, Italians.

The results comparing the three surveys (Table 3) show that the improvements found after learning about the Holocaust have been generally maintained (eg. voting attitudes re Catholics/Protestants) or continued to improve (eg. voting attitudes re Woman/Man). The exception was attitudes to Black people; although the attitudes in this category were better in survey 3 than in survey 1, they had fallen back significantly from the position in survey 2. Interestingly, the attitudes towards English people improved most of all, although with only 52.3% agreeing, it was still significantly poorer than any other category.

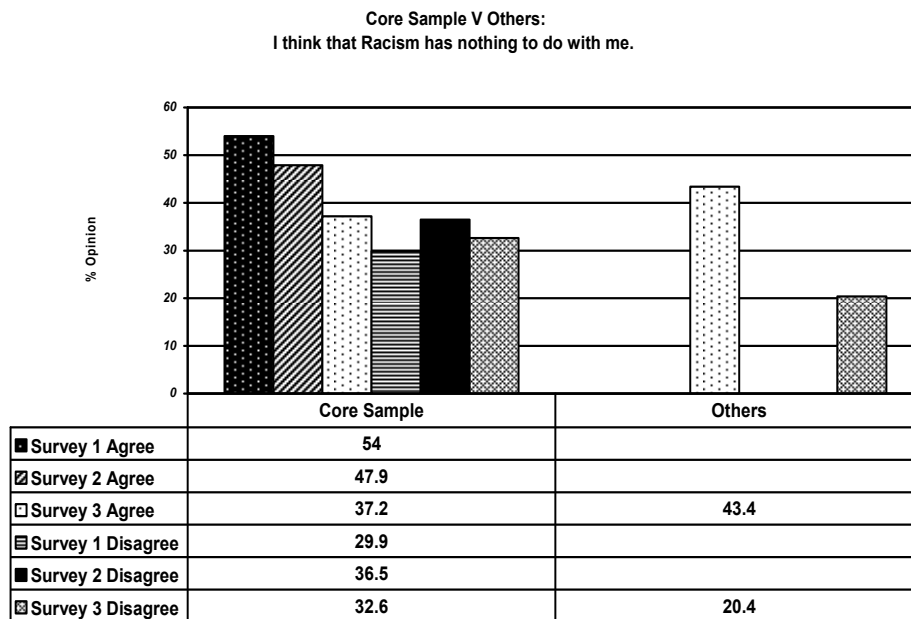
Table 3: Voting attitudes



Comparing the core sample to the others in terms of voting, it was found that in every category our core sample were more tolerant. This suggests that the Holocaust learning had an impact here.

Finally, Table 4 compares our core sample and the others in terms of the statement ‘I think racism has nothing to do with me’. There is a significant difference between the core and others group, with the core group having a more positive attitude in their answers to this question, suggesting that the core group have a greater understanding of collective responsibility for racism than the ‘others’.

Table 4: Comparison of core group and others - Racism has nothing to do with me



Conclusions

In common with much research examining values and opinions, the results are not particularly clearcut. In some areas, there does seem one year on to be a welcome maintaining of the positive dispositions ascertained in the immediate aftermath of the lessons on the Holocaust. Yet, it remains uneven; much tolerance and sympathy towards minorities is still held by our core group, although they have ‘fallen back’ vis-à-vis their attitude towards numbers of minorities (perhaps reflective of a general increase in intolerance in British society). However, in most categories, the attitudes were still better than they had been before the lessons on the Holocaust. There is still a worrying hostility towards English people and it is something that needs to be watched and combated, although there is perhaps a need to understand that it is possible that the pupils have a

quite sophisticated understanding of the differences between oppressed and oppressors and English people do not fit into the category of oppressed. Another explanation however is the possibility that the idea of ‘English’ people in a ‘Scottish’ Parliament was a concept that needed more explanation for these students. With hindsight – and for a future project – we should ask about ‘Polish’ or ‘French’ people in the Parliament in this type of question.

In terms of comparing our sample group with their peers, who had not had the opportunity to study the Holocaust, there is evidence, outlined above, that the core group had stronger positive values, were more tolerant and were more disposed to active citizenship by their understanding of individual responsibility towards racism.

This study suggests that learning about the Holocaust can have both an immediate and lasting impact on pupils’ values; that studying the Holocaust teaches citizenship targets that are central to the development of well-rounded young people. It is worth making the case to teachers that at some stage in their education (perhaps as young as is deemed feasible), pupils should have the opportunity to undertake structured learning experiences about the Holocaust, generalised to reflect the various forms that racism can take in society and linking the Holocaust to other genocides. Whilst the main focus of the research was not directly related to the training of teachers, there are clear implications for both initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

Endnotes

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^{xii} Samuel Totten “Should there be Holocaust education for K-4 students? The answer is no.”, *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Sept/Oct, 12 (1999), 36-39.

^{xiii} Lionel Kochan “Life Over Death”, *Jewish Chronicle*, December 22 (1989).

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Contact details/Brief Biography

Henry Maitles, Head of Department of Curricular Studies, University of Strathclyde
Faculty of Education, Southbrae Drive, Glasgow G13 1PP, Scotland, UK

+44 141 950 3396

+44 141 950 3363 (fax)

+44 7860806648

h.maitles@strath.ac.uk

Henry Maitles is Head of Department of Curricular Studies at the University of Strathclyde Faculty of Education, one of Britain's largest faculties of initial teacher education. He teaches and researches in the area of pupil values, citizenship and the Holocaust. He was on the Scottish Executive Review Group which drew up the citizenship policy currently being implemented in every school in Scotland. Recent publications in the area of Holocaust learning and citizenship include *Values in Education: We're citizens now* (Dunedin Press, October 2005); "Does addressing prejudice and discrimination through Holocaust education produce better citizens?", *Educational Review* 59, 2 (May 2007) pp115-130; "'We don't learn democracy, we live it!': Consulting the Pupil Voice in Scottish Schools", *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* (Vol. 1, No. 3 November, 2006) pp249-267.