



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

## **Report of IHRA's International Research Conference on Education about the Holocaust**

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) International Research Conference on Education about the Holocaust took place at the PH Luzern University of Teacher Education on 15-16 February 2016.

As Monique Eckmann, Chair of IHRA's Education Research Steering Committee stated in her opening address, since IHRA was founded 15 years ago, the educational context of the Holocaust has developed significantly. Alongside increasing numbers of state initiatives, educational programmes, guidelines, and more professionalization, there has also been rapid development in the empirical research being undertaken. IHRA's Education Research Project analysed studies from 15 different language regions, about how the Holocaust is taught and learned. By collecting these studies and providing a cross-language and cross-national overview of current research, the project aimed to foster exchange amongst the different languages, regions, and disciplines covered.

This aim was certainly achieved during the two-day conference, which attracted 150 participants from almost 40 countries. A number of keynote speeches and lectures preceded more detailed presentations and discussions of the research results in parallel workshops. The conference ended with two roundtables in which educational policy makers and organisations providing funding for projects discussed the research results and offered recommendations.

### **Rapidly growing research – diverse results with some trends**

The results presented by Monique Eckmann at the conference came from the examination of around 635 publications which represent 375 different studies. These spanned 15 languages from the "language-regions" German, Nordic, French, Romance, Polish, Slavic, English and Hebrew. The different cultural and pedagogical contexts and traditions resulted in the lessons from this research being deeply contextual, and made it difficult to draw generalisations across the board. Rather, as Doyle Stevick remarked, the research is like "650 puzzle pieces from 40 different puzzles," offering the most helpful insights at the micro level.

Nonetheless, some broad trends in the research literature were identified across languages and regions. These points were brought up repeatedly throughout the conference:

- Students and teachers experience the Holocaust as distinct from other topics

- There are high levels of engagement and interest from students and teachers of all backgrounds
- There are high expectations and ambitious goals for teaching the Holocaust amongst teachers, coupled with a desire for more preparation, assistance and time for teaching the topic
- “Curricular creep” was observed, in which the Holocaust is taught to students of ever younger ages
- Teaching and learning about the Holocaust is more effective in addressing ignorance and passive stereotypes rather than challenging consciously held, strong views or ideologies
- Less confident teachers tend to employ more emotive teaching approaches, whilst confident teachers tend towards more cognitive and experiential methods
- Group encounters are effective in reducing prejudice or stereotypes about the “other”. However, whilst the greatest changes seem to occur through facilitated reflection after the contact, this step is often bypassed in classrooms due to time constraints
- Museum and site visits, although having authenticity, tend not to be effectively integrated into broader instruction. Rather, they are often conducted solely by site facilitators and adopt a stand-alone nature
- Teachers can be anxious about teaching the topic to students with migrant backgrounds, although these students mostly show great interest
- On the whole, teaching and learning about the Holocaust appears to lead to improvements in historical understanding, political tolerance and moral reasoning; to a reduction of stereotypes and prejudice towards Jews and other minorities; to increased empathy and engagement and in a desire to learn more about the topic

A number of challenges or shortcomings that were encountered were also discussed. One of these was the difference in general pedagogical traditions – top-down lecturing styles in some schools versus more collaborative workshop style methods in others. It was suggested that these different educational traditions, rather than the ethnic origins of students, should be considered when assessing the successes and failures of teaching. General educational issues should also be considered – resistance to engage with the topic may be an expression of aversion to authority rather than a dislike of the specific topic of the Holocaust. Finally, it was suggested that too much moral education and a focus on emotions could distort the pedagogical relationship.

### **Region- and language-specific findings and thematic research panels**

When the findings of the research into each language-region were presented in more detail by the members of the research team and the Steering committee, participants had the opportunity to engage with the presenters and ask questions. Many thought-provoking and valuable discussions ensued, with participants and presenters continuing their conversations on the sidelines of the conference. Some of the questions raised included whether teaching the Holocaust is useful for genocide prevention, how history education can help prevent future atrocities, and whether experts in the field of Holocaust education

put an unfair burden on themselves and on students by assuming a “knowledge gap” between the two parties, unique to Holocaust-related history. It was also questioned whether students’ understanding of the Holocaust has changed since IHRA and the Stockholm Declaration were established.

Research was also presented in parallel sessions based on currently relevant or interesting themes; these again provoked lively discussion. Recurring themes from the conference that were also highlighted in these sessions included the impact of context on the way the Holocaust is taught and learned and a need for better teacher training.

### **Challenging our convictions and perceptions – keynote speeches**

Another thought provoking element of the conference was the sharing of experiences in how the Holocaust is taught and learned in different regions, in a number of keynote speeches.

Simone Schweber spoke about how the Holocaust is taught in the USA and proposed how it could be better structured. She suggested that an interactive classroom setting where students undertake the intellectual components of thinking and answering questions would be most beneficial. The teacher’s role should be to structure the students’ discussions, rather than simply feeding them information. However, she noted that this model is currently difficult to adopt in America due to the high expectations placed on teachers to ensure students perform well in standardized tests. Insufficient teacher training and class-based segregation in American schools were also identified, with the Holocaust as a topic that tends to be offered predominantly in more privileged classrooms. However, the emergence of new electronic devices as main providers of information could lead to schools becoming places of authentic learning, with students and teachers questioning, deliberating, evaluating and negotiating rather than simply absorbing information.

Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett presented the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews with reference to Wieseltier’s seven pedagogical principles based on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. POLIN, she pointed out, although a site-specific museum located on a ground of genocide and facing the Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes, is not a Holocaust museum. Rather, it showcases a thousand-year history of Jewish life and culture and their contributions to Poland, a significant portion of which disappeared with the Holocaust. However, it is crucial to create an open narrative with multiple voices, one that is authoritative without being authoritarian. The museum’s core exhibition aims to create a zone of trust which allows visitors to engage with difficult pasts and conflicted histories, an aspect especially important in a country that was the epicenter of the Shoah and where public debates continue to be polarizing. This leaves visitors with an even greater feeling of loss after their visit.

Michalinos Zembylas and Zvi Bekerman presented case studies from Cyprus and Israel to demonstrate how conflicting narratives and emotions relating to traumatic experiences affect education. Identifying the emotional complexities

encountered by both teachers and students, it was suggested that educators should not engage in discourse that sets trauma and emotions in the forefront of the discussion, but should rather work towards peacebuilding, healing and reconciliation through critical pedagogies.

### **Recommendations by policy makers and funding organisations**

Two roundtables allowed educational funding organisations and policy and curriculum makers to reflect on the findings and discussions from the conference, and make a number of recommendations.

Educational policy and curriculum makers recommended that further research should be conducted into the topic, and more funding for national research should be provided by individual countries. The research presented at the conference should also be further examined to create a set of concrete policy recommendations to governments. It was suggested that there should be a focus on the development and sharing of instruments for research – methods, standards and tools that are freely accessible and available in multiple languages. More work should be done to address the knowledge gaps regarding multicultural classrooms and competing memories – especially given the current relevance of this in Europe and beyond with the increasing number of refugees and migrants. More time to teach history or to work on cross-subject projects in schools would be welcomed, as would the inclusion of teachers in the planning of curricula, given how central they are to the effective teaching of the Holocaust. More teacher training was also requested, along with increasing the availability and accessibility of teaching material. Finally, policy makers pointed out a need for improved communication between the academic level, decision makers and curriculum developers.

Representatives from funding organisations recommended that educational programmes about the Holocaust should include time for critical self-reflection and that programmes should be diverse, collaborative and encourage discussions. Projects in the field of Holocaust remembrance and education should be formulated in a way that they are sustainable, and have long term impact. They also identified a need for more exchange and debate on the European level – for this to work, broader translation of materials is needed. Finally, funders said they would like to see more conferences such as this one, as it allows for a more nuanced and balanced outlook on the state of the field.

### **“Mutual understanding and balanced outlooks” – Conclusions, reactions and future possibilities**

Overall, the conference demonstrated that the field of teaching and learning about the Holocaust is a dynamic one that is growing and maturing. With an increasing number of research studies and scholars, a variety of approaches to the research have appeared. While it tends to be difficult to compare experiences and thus learn from them, a number of similarities were identified across the regions.

It was remarked several times, with reference to studies in various regions, that imparting knowledge about the Holocaust is not sufficient to change the attitudes and perceptions of students. National narratives and local contexts also need to be explored in order to create personal connections to the topic and increase the likelihood of positive reactions toward minority groups.

There was no conclusive evidence about the overall level of knowledge about the Holocaust amongst students. There does however seem to be a growing fascination with the figures of perpetrators. As for teachers, those dealing with the topic comprise a diverse community with high levels of interest and strong personal commitment. However, they often feel insufficiently prepared, desire more training, and tend to be unaware of existing resources available to them.

Areas requiring particular attention in future research included younger students, expressions of antisemitism in the classroom during sessions about the Holocaust, and emotions provoked by the topic. There were also several references to the current refugee crisis – it was suggested that Holocaust teaching could be used to speak to students about this topic as well.

Bodo von Borries reflected on the research presented and pointed out that we need to be modest, because all empirical studies in teaching and learning about the Holocaust have their costs, limits and restrictions and that the limits of empirical studies and sensible teaching are caused by the very limits of understanding the Shoah itself and the mourning of the victims of the Shoah.

The conference was met with overwhelmingly positive reactions from participants, who appreciated the open atmosphere, the diverse cultural and professional backgrounds of participants, and the lively discussions that took place throughout. The knowledge shared over the two days helped create a level of mutual understanding and achieve a more balanced outlook in the field. Almost 80 people chose to stay for a third day of post-conference networking, to share their experiences and discuss possibilities for future cooperation.

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We look forward to further research or projects that may come about as a result. In the meantime, those who wish to revisit the keynote speeches and lectures can do so on IHRA's YouTube channel (IHRANews). The research presented at the conference will also be published in full in an academic publication by IHRA, expected to be released in 2017.

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