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Who does what, and why, when teaching about the Holocaust in England's secondary schools?

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Background

The Holocaust is a compulsory topic of study within the English national curriculum for history at Key Stage 3. Little further guidance or direction is given to teachers as to how they are expected to approach this very complicated, potentially contentious and often emotive subject. In 2008, the Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP) was established at the Institute of Education to support teachers in this field. As very little was known about existing classroom practice, an extensive empirical investigation was undertaken from which this paper will report. The research generated a wealth of rich and complex data and offers an invaluable opportunity to examine the pedagogical choices, judgements and interpretations made by teachers and the challenges and constraints they can encounter within the context of a single mandated component of the current national curriculum.

Research Questions

The HEDP research sought to offer a comprehensive overview of what was happening with regard to Holocaust education in England's secondary schools. This paper will focus on questions concerning teacher knowledge and teacher agency. For example, what do teachers choose to include within a unit of work on the Holocaust? On what basis are these judgements made? How do their decisions accord with or diverge from continuing wider scholarship of the Holocaust?

Methods

A two-phase, mixed methodological approach was employed. After extensive piloting, an online survey was made available on the HEDP website. This was comprised of 54 different questions and captured a variety of demographic, factual and evaluative information from participants. It was completed by 2,108 teachers between November 2008 and February 2009. 68 teachers then took part in small group follow-up interviews conducted in 24 different schools across England. The interviews were intended to add depth and complexity to the survey data and to provide a greater opportunity for teachers to articulate their thoughts and experiences in their own words. A semi-structured interview guide was developed on the basis of early analysis of the survey results. The paper will draw upon both statistical and interpretative analysis of the survey data and interview accounts.

Frame

The Holocaust Education Development Programme is itself underlain by an ethic of 'community enquiry' and conceives of teaching and learning as reflective practices. Of central importance is a commitment to harnessing the potential of ongoing integration of academic scholarship, classroom practice and educational research. This is reflected in the focus of the paper. Critically, the paper will examine relationships between teachers' specialist subject knowledge, their wider disciplinary, professional, pedagogic and personal knowledge bases and experience and alternative, external sources of information and understanding about the Holocaust. Although the paper is framed in part by the specialist literatures of Holocaust historiography and Holocaust education, it is also intended as an illustrative examination of much broader questions concerning what teachers choose to do in their classrooms and why.

Research findings

A considerable majority of those who took part in the HEDP research reported that they considered it was very important to teach about the Holocaust. Most also expressed confidence that they were very knowledgeable about the subject and well prepared to do so. The Holocaust itself is the focus of continuing, extensive academic discussion and debate. It is also a subject about which many popular conceptions and - more importantly - misconceptions are widely held. While the research revealed that some teachers demonstrate very detailed specialist subject knowledge and clear understanding, for others, knowledge of the Holocaust appeared to be drawn in large part from popular rather than academic discourse. The paper explores some of the ways that this in turn can impact upon classroom practice and pedagogical approach.