Connecting the dots:

helping Year 9 to debate the purposes of Holocaust and genocide education

Why do we teach about the Holocaust and about other genocides? The Holocaust has been a compulsory part of the English National Curriculum since 1991; however, curriculum documents say little about why pupils should learn about the Holocaust or about what they should learn. Tamsin Leyman and Richard Harris decided to use the opportunity presented by the recent National Curriculum review to explore these issues with pupils, some of whom had studied other genocides and some of whom had not. Their article reports how students responded to the challenge in the context of learning about the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide and argues that asking students to think about why and how they are learning about these topics has beneficial effects, not least on students' thinking about the significance of the Holocaust.

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Introduction

Having taught and worked with history teachers over numerous years, it is evident, despite what some politicians would have us believe, that the general overall quality of the history education profession is extremely high. The inventiveness of history teachers and history educators is a major strength; the ability of individuals and groups to devise engaging and imaginative teaching ideas is often extraordinary, while the capacity to respond to initiatives in an intellectually rigorous manner often ensures high-quality pedagogy and debate within the community, as is evidenced by debates in these pages and at events such as the annual Historical Association and Schools' History Project conferences. Another attribute of the history education community is a collective desire to look for ways to improve the quality of history education, and there are times when, as a community, we are faced by challenging questions and issues.

One such challenge is the question 'Why?' Most teachers are probably fairly comfortable answering the question, 'Why should we teach history?', particularly when students come to make choices about GCSE and A-level subjects, yet questions about why we teach particular historical topics, or take a particular slant on those topics, can be more problematic. Clearly the degree of challenge raised by such questions will vary from topic to topic; for example most teachers will probably be able to make a strong case for teaching the Norman Conquest or the First World War, but deciding which particular content to include or which particular perspective to examine is trickier. Should the Norman Conquest focus on why the Normans successfully invaded, or on the consequences of the Conquest? Should we look at trench life in the First World War, or focus on how the war was different from previous conflicts? Should there be a focus on technology in the war or on the way in which the war brought about social change? Such questions become more pressing given the limiting timetable constraints faced in many schools. We cannot teach everything and we have to make choices.

These questions can become even more problematic with particular topics such as the Holocaust and the teaching of genocide. Most teachers would probably not have a problem arguing that these are important topics to study, but what we want pupils to gain from studying them is a much more difficult question to answer. Are we simply educating students *about* the Holocaust, or are we educating students *to help prevent* possible future atrocities? Are we engaged in straightforward historical analysis of the past, examining what happened and how, or are we engaged in moral education or anti-racist education?

These are very important questions to answer and shape what we choose to focus on, how we teach and what we wish to achieve when teaching. These questions are often hotly contested, as the differing views expressed by Illingworth and Kinloch earlier in these pages show.[1] Research by the University of London's Institute of Education (IOE) in 2009 also revealed wide variation in the ways that teachers thought about the purposes of teaching the Holocaust.[2] And it is not clear that the revised National Curriculum will help clarify matters for the history teacher who expressed deep confusion about what was expected:

> *What does the Government want us to be teaching every child in this country [about the Holocaust]? … What aspects are they wanting us to teach? What is the focus? … What is the outcome they want us to have with the students that*

we're teaching? …Learning from the past or what we can learn in the future? …Or is it that they just want us to teach the facts, the figures?[3]

Clearly there is a serious debate here and the issues are complicated. Indeed, when we embarked on developing this project together, as part of the IOE's Beacon Schools in Holocaust education programme, with its focus on relating the Holocaust to other genocides, one of the issues which vexed us most was the aims of teaching the Holocaust. In the end, after lengthy discussion we decided this complexity could be turned into a virtue and we decided to focus our teaching on precisely this issue.

Previous research has shown that students often do not know why they study history or particular aspects of history.[4] This issue has been a focus of long-standing work with students at Testwood School, through which we have tried to engage our students with some of the bigger debates about the nature of history and its place in the curriculum. It became obvious to us that, despite the complexity of the material and issues, we should engage students with debates about why they should learn about the Holocaust and other genocides. It would help them to 'connect the dots'.

Should we teach about the Holocaust?

When the National Curriculum for History was first being designed the place of the Holocaust in the curriculum was vigorously debated and it was not included in the 1989 interim report of the History Working Group. Despite these early recommendations, the Holocaust was part of the first National Curriculum, and has remained a compulsory part of secondary history education ever since. In the 2008 revised National Curriculum for History, it was stated that children should be taught about:

The changing nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples and its lasting impact on national, ethnic, racial, cultural or religious issues, including the nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust, and the role of European and international institutions in resolving conflicts.[5]

However, at a time when what should and should not be taught in the history classroom, and how it should be taught, is once again in the spotlight, the purpose of Holocaust education in schools will continue to be debated. When the curriculum review was first announced in 2011, Lord Baker, the architect of the first National Curriculum, said that he did not believe British schools should teach about the Holocaust.[6] Nonetheless, the Holocaust remains key in the new National Curriculum for September 2014: under the heading 'challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day' studying 'the Holocaust' is clearly identified as a core focus and, among history teachers, the Holocaust's place in the curriculum is not really in doubt.[7] Research conducted by the IOE in 2009 found that 85 per cent of respondents who taught the Holocaust felt it should be compulsory content.[8] The problem, then, is not whether the Holocaust should be taught in schools but why it should be taught and how. Recent research by Lucy Russell, whose findings were confirmed also in subsequent national research conducted by the IOE, highlights a wide variance in rationales for teaching about the Holocaust, which tend, nevertheless, to focus on moral and social aims: 'six out of the ten history teachers I interviewed talked about the moral lessons of the Holocaust being of *primary* importance'.[9] Although both the current and 2014 National Curriculum makes teaching the Holocaust compulsory, there are no clear guidelines on why and how to teach it or on what to teach and, to problematise this further, academies, free schools and independent schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum, so they can disregard Holocaust education altogether. In addition, there is no compulsory requirement to teach any genocide other than the Holocaust. As a result, learners' experience of Holocaust education can be very variable and it is unlikely they will investigate any other genocides beyond the Holocaust in any depth. The continuance of genocides since the Holocaust may for some raise questions about why the Holocaust is still compulsory content on the National Curriculum. Responding to these issues, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) assembled a group of international educators who published a paper to help teachers to relate the Holocaust to other genocides and crimes against humanity.[10] It states that:

A clear and well- informed understanding of the Holocaust, the paradigmatic genocide, may help educators and students understand other genocides, mass atrocities, and human rights violations.[11]

Why should we teach the Holocaust and other genocides to Year 9?

These issues of what to teach, why teach it and how to approach teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides are problematic. In the last academic year we had the privilege of being involved with the IOE's Beacon Schools programme as a colleague in a participating school (Tamsin Leyman) and as an IOE Associate, working with a number of schools (Richard Harris). Together, we worked to develop a local network of schools, centred on Testwood School, focused on creating teaching and learning materials on the Holocaust and other genocides and, in particular, on the legacy of genocide. Our work aimed to keep a very strong focus on purpose – on exploring why we teach the Holocaust and other genocides. As history teachers we are all clear that knowing things is important, but why we should learn about particular things is often overlooked. Even when that discussion happens at departmental level, when designing new schemes of work or considering new topics to teach, it is rare for the discussion to be shared with students. This was something we were keen to address in the teaching and learning materials we were developing in our local network.

In order to develop these lessons, we had to be clear, as a department, about why we believed that the Holocaust and other genocides should be taught and about their importance in the curriculum. Yehuda Bauer has argued that the Holocaust was an unprecedented event.[12] While examples of atrocities and mass murder resonate throughout history the Holocaust is without precedent, in terms of the motivations

Figure 1: Why relate the Holocaust to other genocides and crimes against humanity? Points drawn from the IHRA Education Working Group paper on the Holocaust and other genocides.

1. As the Holocaust led to the creation of the term 'genocide' we can use it as a starting point and the foundation for studying other genocides.
2. In identifying key similarities and differences between the Holocaust and other genocides we can give students the opportunity to better understand the particular historical significance of the Holocaust, and how study of the Holocaust might contribute to our understanding of other genocidal events.
3. In comparing the Holocaust to other genocides and crimes against humanity, common patterns and processes in the development of genocidal situations appear. Through the understanding of a genocidal process and in identifying stages and warning signs in this process, a contribution can hopefully be made to prevent future genocides.
4. It could help students understand the significance of the Holocaust in the development of international law and to understand attempts made by the international community to respond to genocide in the modern world.
5. To compare the Holocaust to other genocides could help our students to be aware of the potential danger of other genocides and crimes against humanity in the world today. This may strengthen an awareness of their own roles and responsibilities in the global community.
6. To compare the Holocaust to other genocides may help to overcome the lack of recognition of other genocides.
7. Knowledge of the Holocaust may also be helpful in considering how to come to terms with the past in other societies after genocide, how communities can respond to genocide, and how survivors can attempt to live with their experiences.

and intentions of the perpetrators, and represented a continent-wide attempt to murder every last Jewish man, woman and child and a potential global ambition to kill all Jews everywhere that they could be found. Having said that, teaching it in schools presents numerous challenges and difficulties. The lack of a carefully thought-through historical rationale for teaching the Holocaust can account for the variance in teaching noted by both Russell and the IOE. It may also be the reason why some use it to teach moral lessons rather than as a rigorous historical inquiry. This has led to some, such as Geoffrey Short, to suggest that 'it is debatable whether covering the Holocaust superficially is preferable to not covering it at all.'[13] Although we might sympathise with Short's view, as teachers we have a responsibility to work within the limitations we face and to find ways to allow students time fully to investigate the complexities of the events. The Holocaust holds an important and central place in our collective memory and young people are exposed to a wealth of Holocaust imagery and motifs in the mass media, so they must be able to evaluate the range of claims and interpretations made about the Holocaust. This was the central argument of Paul Salmons' article in *Teaching History* 141, where he argues that it is 'essential for young people's educational literacy that they understand this central event of our time and are able to evaluate critically the diverse claims made about it'.[14] So as a department we agreed that the events could not be ignored in the secondary classroom.

Just as important as wrestling with why to teach the Holocaust and other genocides, was considering how we should approach teaching these difficult issues. Nicholas Kinloch argues that the Holocaust should be taught from an objective, historical standpoint:

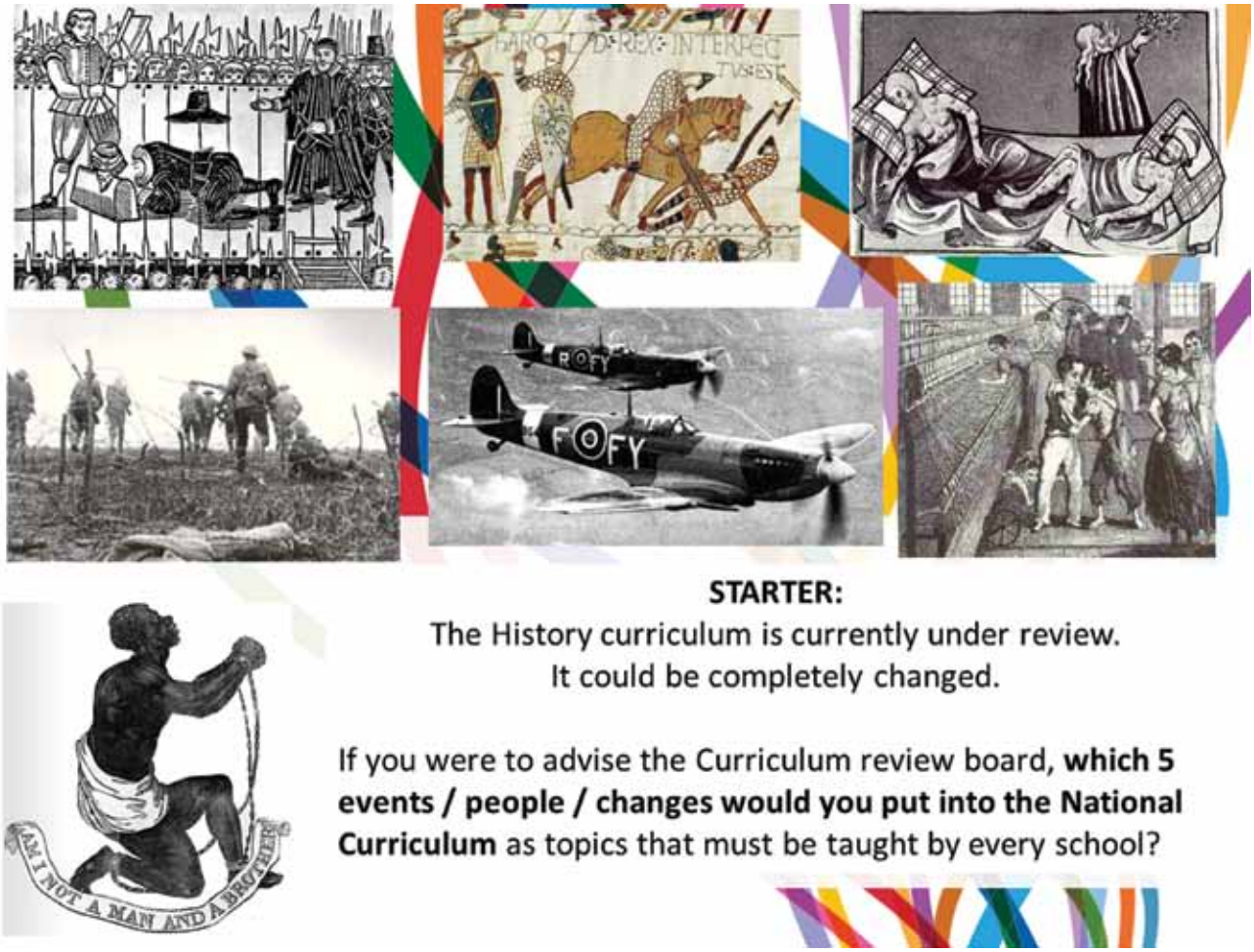
> *We should teach the Shoah in schools. But I do not think that history teachers will do so effectively until we have removed it from its quasi-mystical associations and clarified our own objectives.*[15]

While we accepted the argument that it was important to focus on the Holocaust as history and to focus on the events, we also felt that taking an exclusively historical approach would deprive students of opportunities to consider the topic in its full complexity. McLaughlin makes the point that as the education process is inextricably linked to moral, social, cultural or spiritual considerations, it follows that school history teaching must also fulfil this role in some way.[16] Equally Haydn and Salmons agree that history can never be entirely divorced from the moral issues, the latter arguing that our historical enquiry questions are often a function of our moral concerns.[17] It was clear to us, therefore, that while an historical approach was essential and whilst it was important that students develop a complex understanding of the Holocaust's historical context, it was also important to address moral and ethical questions that are inseparable from the historical study of the Holocaust. However, we were very clear that we would not use Holocaust education to teach unduly simplistic lessons like 'racism is bad' or to teach about the dangers of intolerance, and that we must take a historical approach, for as Haydn states, 'we need to ask the usual range of questions which the discipline of history requires'.[18] An historical study of the Holocaust can reveal surprising and disturbing details that can challenge students' preconceptions. It helps them see beyond the notion that perpetrators were inhuman monsters, the notion that rescuers were simply brave and heroic and the notion that bystanders were simply cowardly or uncaring.[19] As Salmons argues:

> *Many of the 'big historical questions' we want our students to investigate are a function of the moral questions that continue to trouble academic historians, as they search for the meaning of human action and inaction during the Holocaust.*[20]

Our aim in teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides was not just simply that the students should know 'more stuff'. We felt strongly that students must be given the opportunity to consider the universal implications of the Holocaust and, as Gregory states:

Figure 2: The starter task from the first lesson



It is not enough to inform about the Holocaust; our task is to educate young people about it… to encourage an understanding of how it came about and what its significance was and, importantly, might be to us at the present time.[21]

Therefore, for us, it was not just enough to educate about the Holocaust. We felt that if we did not use this opportunity to make the link with other genocides we were missing an opportunity to explore one key aspect of the contemporary significance of the Holocaust. We found the recommendations of the IHRA very helpful in developing our rationale further (Figure 1).

Developing the enquiry

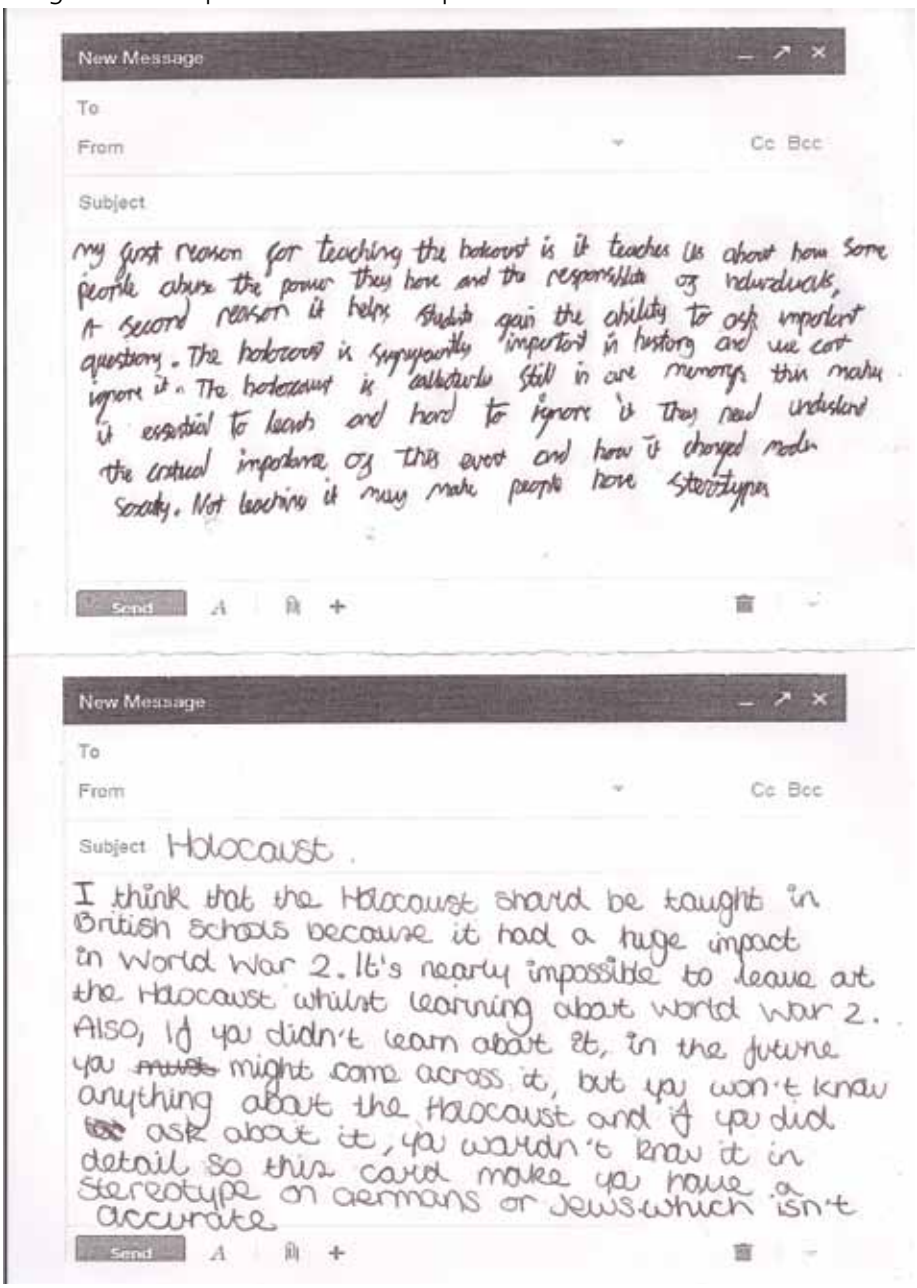
The aim of the first new enquiry that we developed was to help students consider whether the Holocaust should be taught in English schools, and how it could be approached. We framed the issue as an aspect of the broader questions raised by the National Curriculum review (Figure 2). The lesson began by asking students what five events, people or changes they thought should be included in a revised National Curriculum for History. Students were challenged to provide arguments for these events, people or changes beyond 'it was important' or 'it's interesting'.

Lord Baker's article in the *Daily Telegraph* from November 2011, stating that the Holocaust should not be taught, provided the stimulus for this lesson: students were introduced to Lord Baker's statement that the Holocaust should not be taught in English schools, but not the article or Baker's reasoning. They were asked to come up with reasons why he might suggest this. Students had already carried out an extensive investigation into the development of persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe. Students were asked to come up with a number of arguments for not teaching the topic, ranging from it creating negative stereotypes of Germans or of Jewish people as simply victims, to it not being relevant to English schoolchildren. Students were then given cards with arguments against teaching the Holocaust, which they organised on to a continuum of strong to weak arguments. The continuum aimed to help them start to evaluate these arguments, and many students naturally started to challenge them at this point. Before taking the discussion any further, the students were also given some time to consider how they thought we should approach a debate about sensitive and controversial topics like this. Students were able to identify the importance of listening to and trying to understand the views of others. Bearing these points in mind, students then evaluated Baker's arguments as presented in the *Daily Telegraph* article, considering whether he was arguing effectively and sensitively.

We then moved into the real thrust of the lesson, to challenge Lord Baker's arguments. Again, students were asked to come up with their own ideas about why it might be argued that the Holocaust should be taught in English schools. The enquiry was taught twice. The first time was with a class that had not done any work on other genocides at this point. Some of the reasons they gave for teaching the Holocaust were vague statements about 'never again', reflecting their lack of

Figure 3: Instructions for students in the emailing task

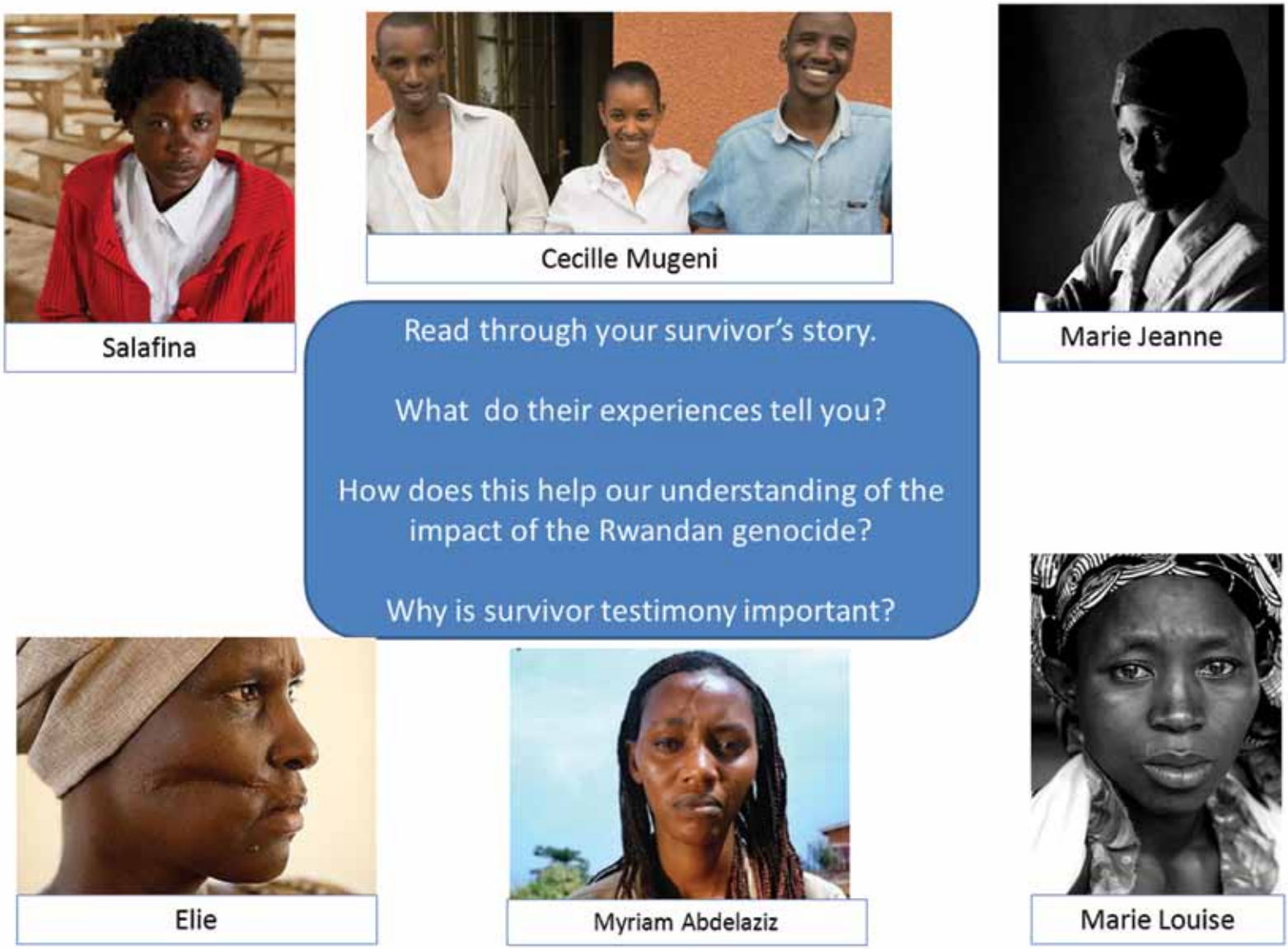
Figure 4: Examples of students' responses



understanding of other genocides. We decided to explore how the enquiry would work with a second group, who had been taught a few lessons on other genocides and the Rwandan genocide in particular. This second group's responses were much sharper and they were able to 'connect the dots' and to show better understanding. The concern is sometimes expressed that teaching other genocides may diminish the significance of the Holocaust; however, we found that the opposite was the case. Students were encouraged to make careful comparisons and we emphasised the fact that we are not comparing suffering. Students were able to consider the issue of genocide prevention and showed better understanding of why people commit genocide. They suggested that looking at the Holocaust could help us see the complexity in the perpetrators' motivations and how this could be applied to countries where there are early warning signs which indicate the danger of mass killing or genocide. Students in the first group suggested studying the Holocaust is important in terms of looking at choices people make, but were less clear about why this is important. Both groups suggested that studying the Holocaust is important as it is part of our collective memory; the Holocaust is a topic for films, TV shows and books like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and students felt if they were not taught it at school then they would only have a very simplistic understanding. Having come up with their own ideas, students then examined the views of historians and education experts on why the Holocaust should be taught.[22] Some were very pleased to see their own ideas reflected in reasons provided by these experts.

The final challenge was for the students to use the thinking that they had developed to help them write a convincing argument in favour of or against teaching about the Holocaust (Figure 3). Richard Harris was the addressee for student emails, as an 'external' expert and as someone who helped to write the 2008 National Curriculum. Students were told that they were free to argue either for or against the inclusion of the Holocaust in the curriculum, although, in fact, none of the students took Lord Baker's view. We felt that it was important to allow them freedom to support either view, to avoid this becoming little more than an exercise in rhetorical argument in which students marshalled evidence for a view merely for the sake of it. To focus the students' ideas in the email to Richard, they had to keep their answer to under 200 words. I also encouraged them to address some of the reasons given to not teach the Holocaust, and to give counter-arguments. They used the connective grid on building explanations developed by Hampshire teacher Paul Barrett to help them develop their arguments.[23]

Figure 5: PowerPoint slide introducing the testimony of Rwandan survivors



The student responses indicated that the work we had done at Testwood, on helping students to understand the purpose of studying history generally and in engaging them with the debates about its nature and place in the curriculum, had been largely successful (Figure 4). We think that it is unlikely that they would have been able to develop their arguments about the Holocaust as effectively without the preparatory work on considering the case for history more generally.

In the second lesson they went on to consider how the Holocaust should be taught – to consider what content to include and what sorts of approaches are appropriate and helpful in the investigation. They had 20 images showing various aspects of the Holocaust from which they had to select eight which would form the basis of an investigation. The images covered Jewish life before the Second World War, Hitler's rise to power and the early stages of persecution, the development of persecution of both Jewish and non-Jewish groups between 1939 and 1941, ghettos, killing centres, resistance, liberation and aftermath.

We made a conscious decision not to use horrific imagery as we felt that the use of images of this kind does not show respect for the victims and can cause distress or embarrassment among students. They also had to consider the problem of what evidence should be used, discussing the problems of using perpetrator evidence, which forms the largest basis of evidence about the Holocaust, versus evidence from the victims or from other witnesses. We wanted students to be aware that much of the source material relating to the Holocaust was produced by the Nazis and their collaborators – a simple web search would find written documents, photographs and even film clips produced by the perpetrators. The aim was to get students to consider that if the past is only seen through the eyes of the perpetrators then we risk seeing the victims only as the Nazis saw them, perpetuating their dehumanisation. This developed issues raised in the first lesson, as many of the reasons given not to teach the Holocaust were more about poor teaching of the topic, such as a lack of time or not giving sufficient complex context, rather than valid reasons not to teach it at all. Having done a lot of work with students this year on the concept of what 'our' history is and how it relates to their lives it was pleasing to see students dismiss the idea that we should not study the Holocaust because it was not relevant to them.

Developing an enquiry into the legacy of other genocides

The second new enquiry that we developed looked at the legacy of the Rwandan genocide, and why this should be taught in secondary schools. Students had already studied the causes and nature of the genocide in Rwanda, and completed the enquiry into why the Holocaust should be taught. So at the start of this lesson students were challenged to explore the question, 'Why should the Rwandan genocide be included in the school curriculum?' The ideas that students proposed in response to this question were to be re-visited at the end of the lesson. As the lesson progressed, pupils were reminded of what Rwanda had been like before the genocide, before they examined information on cards about the legacy of the genocide. Students were encouraged to identify possible categories to sort the cards into, and after discussion we settled on economic impact, political impact, social impact and justice for survivors. This gave them more understanding of how Rwanda was changed by genocide. They were then asked to consider what they thought might be missing from this information, in the light of their investigation into the Holocaust. They quickly identified the lack of survivor testimony. In pairs, students then looked at the testimony of one of five survivors and shared the survivor experiences they had examined with the class.

Their challenge then was to plan a proposal for a documentary on 'Rwanda: 20 years on' for the twentieth anniversary next year. They had to consider three key questions: Who are you aiming your documentary at? What do you want your viewers to know? What do you want your documentary to do? In their planning they also had to address what the focus would be for the documentary – one particular aspect or an overview, what key information they would include and what survivor testimony they would use. There was a wide variance in the documentary designs the students created. Many chose to focus on the legacy of the genocide, possibly a reflection of the emphasis we had placed on legacy in the preceding lessons. Several went away and did additional research on the survivor or survivors they had elected to focus on. Many students were particularly interested in the impact of the genocide on children and how it would affect future generations.

Finally we returned to the students' ideas that had been collected at the start of the lesson on why they thought the Rwandan genocide should be taught. They were able to refine their original thoughts from the beginning of the lesson, where they had made some general, simplistic statements about why Rwanda should be taught. Instead, students were more specific in their reasoning for teaching the Rwandan genocide, suggesting that it is important to teach the genocide as most survivors are still seeking justice, or because of the sheer number of people killed in a very short time-span. Some considered the reaction, or lack of it, from the international community and the long-term legacy on the country, particularly as survivors and perpetrators have to live side-by-side. Students were able to draw comparisons to the legacy of the Holocaust, and why these topics should be taught in English schools. By making these comparisons, students' understanding of both the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide was developed.

Conclusion

We feel that the work carried out in these lessons has had several benefits. Too often the choice of historical topics in schools is a 'closed book' to students, a secret that teachers keep to themselves. We found that engaging students with debates about what should be studied and why, helped them understand the complexity of the past better, that it helped them to better appreciate what they are taught and so enhance their understanding of the value of history and the way in which it can have an impact on their lives. We also feel that it helps to build contextual understanding since in order to articulate reasons for studying a topic students have to explore that topic in a broader framework. Learning about other genocides also enabled our Year 9 students to sharpen their understanding of the historical significance of the Holocaust. Through careful and sensitive comparisons of genocides and other crimes against humanity 13- and 14-year-old students can start to make sense of the nature and consequences of human action and inaction, those 'big historical questions' Salmons refers to.[24] Rather than diminishing the historical significance of the Holocaust, teaching other genocides actually strengthens it, as students are able to make links and comparisons, and see the value of this in terms of genocide prevention.

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