

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE THEME OF SHOAH INTO TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Aim. In this paper, we present selected results of a research survey conducted among teacher education students to determine their preconceptions about the implementation of the events of the Shoah into teaching at different levels of education.

Methods. In this paper we answer the following research questions: Would the respondents welcome a greater curricular anchoring of the Shoah in the Framework Curriculum for Primary Education? Are prospective teachers interested in various books on the Shoah in their spare time? What methods and forms of work were used in teaching in connection with the events of the Shoah at the graduated primary school? In which year of primary school do respondents think it is appropriate to include Shoah topics? Are the respondents satisfied with the level of integration of the Shoah phenomenon into teaching at the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc?

Results. Most respondents believe that the Shoah phenomenon is only suitable for integration at the lower-secondary school. This preconception stems mainly from the respondents' previous experience in primary schools.

Conclusion. The results point to the fact that the transformation of the perception of the defined events, and the related broader possibilities of their application in Czech institutional teaching, will be quite complex.

Cognitive value. It is necessary to begin to perceive the Shoah also in a certain transcendental, visceral level and, based on the internalisation of the resulting feelings, to begin to build pupils' awareness of the importance of democracy, freedom, or tolerance.

Keywords: Shoah, Holocaust, implementation, quantitative research investigation, preconcept

INTRODUCTION

The events of the Shoah (the Holocaust) are very relevant for today's increasingly globalised society, especially with the warnings that this lineage of the Second World War presents. Peter Hayes (2010) states that *Shoah* is a Hebrew term meaning *catastrophe*. Shoah refers to the Holocaust, a historical event of mass genocide. The United States Holocaust Memorial Council aims to prevent future atrocities through education and action (Blumenthal, 2014). The term *Shoah* emphasises the sudden disaster and catastrophe that befell the Jewish population, highlighting the horrific nature of the events without sanctifying the senseless killing (Hayes, 2010). For the purposes of this article, we consider the terms Shoah and Holocaust synonymous.

The similarities of the Shoah in the Czech and global context and the warnings that these events imply for contemporary society are dealt with by Peter Hallama (2020) or Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval (2022), and more philosophically by Zygmunt Bauman (2023). The germs of Czechoslovak anti-Semitism in relation to the cultural, social, or economic background of this state are dealt with by Blanka Soukupová (2021) or Martin Joachim Wein (2021). The history of the Jewish communities in Bohemia and the fate of important families and individuals are the subject of essays in "Jews in Bohemia: A collection of papers from a seminar held on 12 and 13 October 2021" (2021). The fate of groups of people or individuals affected by Nazi repression during the Second World War in the territory of the Protectorate, in broad socio-cultural contexts, is the subject of Jiří Padevět (2021).

We are convinced that the events of the Shoah fully belong in the primary school curriculum, in the widest possible range of subjects. Currently, the Holocaust is explicitly taught in History in the eighth grade (see Faltýn, 2021). We are of the opinion that, with appropriately chosen methods and forms of teaching, this line of events of the Second World War can be implemented in other subjects or cross-cutting themes (see, e.g., Mašát, 2022), in all grades of primary education.

Teachers are the primary intermediary between students and the presentation of the Shoah events. On the role of teachers in introducing pupils and students to the phenomenon, Jeffrey Glanz (2006, p. 186 as cited in Lindquist, 2013, p. 33) notes: "Teachers must guide students and, in [...] hands-on 'activities', ask questions and open up thought-provoking frames of reference." We believe that many activities or thought (un)stimulations are internalised by pre-service teachers already during their studies at different levels of education and they enter practice with certain preconceptions, which, in relation to the aim of the research investigation, are perceived as pupils' experiences or ideas about how teaching about the Shoah should take place in primary schools, but also misconceptions. We are of the opinion that it is important to find out what preconceptions future teachers (not only) of the first level of primary schools possess, so that it is possible to transform and target them in a certain way in the given field in the form of further teacher education, but also, for example, by a certain

transformation of the curricula of faculties of education towards the current needs of a democratic society. The events of the Shoah do not only point to various manifestations of inhumanity but can also be used to develop pupils' critical thinking or to find arguments. In this context, Kathleen C. Martin (2007) postulates the method *Did the Shoah Really Happen? Evaluating Sources and Evidence* in which pupils and students should be confronted with views that centre on the information that the events of the Shoah did not happen. A worksheet has been created on the issue of Holocaust denial (Lipstadt, 2006).

A summary is given by Urs Lindner (2022) who claims that the Shoah, or Holocaust, is a topic of significant importance and relevance. It is a subject that is explored from various perspectives and dimensions. The uniqueness of the Shoah is a highly debated aspect, with different versions of the uniqueness thesis being discussed. One plausible version suggests that the Shoah was an unprecedented genocide.

We have presented many arguments why the events of the Shoah should be part of Czech compulsory education, even at the first level. In our opinion, to fulfil the potential of the defined phenomenon in building a desirable axiological and moral ladder of pupils, their teachers must fulfil several conditions:

- they must have a thorough knowledge of the Second World War and its most salient lines and aspects;
- they must know the appropriate methods for presenting these events;
- they must be able to set themselves the objective of presenting the events of the Shoah to pupils;
- be able to explain to pupils the relevance of the Shoah;
- they must be able to revise their preconceptions with which they approach the teaching of the Shoah.

The revision of the preconceptions of future teachers and practitioners should begin with their identification. This was the focus of the research investigation, some of the results of which are presented in this paper.

CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH IN THE FIELD

Considering the focus of the paper and its aim, i.e. to point out the experience of future primary school teachers with the integration of the literary representation of the Shoah phenomenon into their teaching, we reflect, in our opinion, the most important Czech scholarly contributions that have been published in this field. The searches were conducted using available online databases. Due to the timeliness of the presented insights, we focused on papers published after 2020.

Milan Mašát et al. (2020), in their study material *Anthology of Shoah-Themed Texts for Grades 6-9 of Primary Schools: With Methodological Appendix*, selected a total

of twenty-eight Shoah-themed excerpts that they consider adequate for reading by pupils in the second cycle of Czech primary schools. In the *Introduction* (pp. 6-8), they point out, among other things, that especially the excerpts dedicated for implementation in 6th can also be used in teaching at the first level of primary schools. All the contributions included in the anthology have been tested in pedagogical practice; a year group was recommended based on a research investigation, and questions and tasks for each extract were also formulated.

It can be stated that in the Czech professional context the topic of the Shoah and its place in teaching at the first level of primary schools is not emphasised. In our opinion, this fact may be due to the a priori refusal to integrate this phenomenon into teaching at the appropriate level of education, either because teachers are afraid of traumatising pupils or because teachers are afraid of the reaction of pupils' legal representatives. We believe that the first reason stems from teachers' ignorance of appropriate methods for presenting the events of the Shoah to pupils at the first level of primary school. The issue has been addressed, for example, by David H. Lindquist (2010; 2013), Shulamit Imber (2013), Howard Tinberg and Ronald Weisberger (2014), Martin (2007), and Sabrina Moisan et al. (2015). Methods specifically targeting pre-primary and primary students are addressed by Eleanor Hersh (2016), Dina Kraft (2014), and Anya Unterman (2016). We find the roots of the second argument in the fact that some aspects of the Second World War or the events that followed closely after its end, which resonate in society to this day, were to some extent neglected, even tabooed, in communist totalitarian Czechoslovakia (compare Holý et al., 2011 or Imhof, 2020). The degree of tabooing of the events in question is addressed in the paper "The Holocaust/Shoah as a Tabooed Component in Czech Society's Memory after World War II?" (Soukupová, 2022).

Another study "Where do I sit? Transitioning from classroom teacher to educational researcher to explore students' ideas about the Holocaust" (Kirkland, 2022) focused on students aged 12-14 found that their ideas about the Holocaust developed over time through their history lessons, indicating that their preconceptions were shaped by their educational experiences.

Students' preconceptions about the Holocaust varied depending on their experiences and educational context (Efrat, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research survey was conducted through a non-standardised questionnaire consisting of twenty-four questions. The first eight were aimed at obtaining information about the respondents (e.g. year and form of study, study programme, etc.). This was followed by questions that sought to find out about the experiences of students of the Faculty of Education at Palacký University in Olomouc with

the integration of the Shoah phenomenon into the teaching of the primary school they attended. The questions were closed-ended with the possibility of choosing one or more options, and of course there was an 'other' item in which the respondents had the opportunity to write their answers that they did not find in the menu. The questionnaire was largely based on a validated research instrument that was used in a research project aimed at finding out the opinions of teachers of Czech Language and Literature on the implementation of the Shoah theme in the teaching of literature education at the lower-secondary schools. The overall reliability of the questionnaire determined by the reliability coefficient based on standardised Cronbach's alpha is 0.863.

The online version of the questionnaire (via my.surveio.com) was distributed to all students of the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc whose study programme includes at least partly courses provided by the Department of Czech Language and Literature of Palacký University. The questionnaire was sent to the respective potential respondents in the full-time, combined and extension forms of study via official student e-mail addresses.

The main aim of the research, to find out the preconceptions of the future teachers in implementation of the Shoah themes in primary school teaching, was operationalised in the following research questions:

- Were the events of the Shoah included in the primary school curriculum they attended? In which grade? In what subject?
- Would the respondents welcome a greater curricular anchoring of the Shoah in the *Framework Curriculum for Primary Education*?
- Are prospective teachers interested in various books on the Shoah in their spare time?
- What methods and forms of work were used in teaching in connection with the events of the Shoah at the graduated primary school?
- In which year of primary school do respondents think it is appropriate to include Shoah topics?
- Are the respondents satisfied with the level of integration of the Shoah phenomenon into teaching (in any subject or course) at the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc?

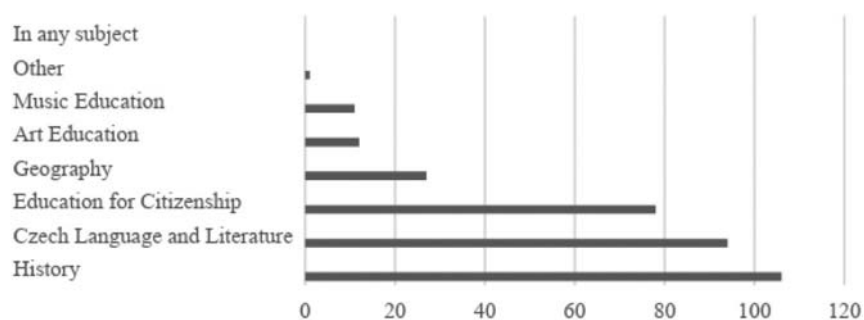
A total of 342 respondents of all forms of study, whose study plan in some way includes a subject provided by the Department of Czech Language and Literature of Palacký University, participated in the research survey. In this paper we present partial results related to the preconceptions of future teachers of the first grade of primary schools. A total of 113 (109 women and 4 men) completed the questionnaire. A total of 102 respondents stated that they were studying full-time, while the remaining 11 were studying in a combined form. All of them are studying a continuous five-year master's degree programme in teaching for the first cycle of primary schools.

RESULTS

According to the answers of the respective respondents, it is appropriate to include the Shoah in a relatively wide range of subjects (respondents could choose more than one option). History received the most choices (see Figure 1). As the graphical representation shows, the subjects Czech Language and Literature and Education for Citizenship had a relatively high representation in the answers of the respondents. Somewhat surprising was the number of responses for Geography.

Figure 1

The appropriateness of including the Shoah phenomenon in individual subjects

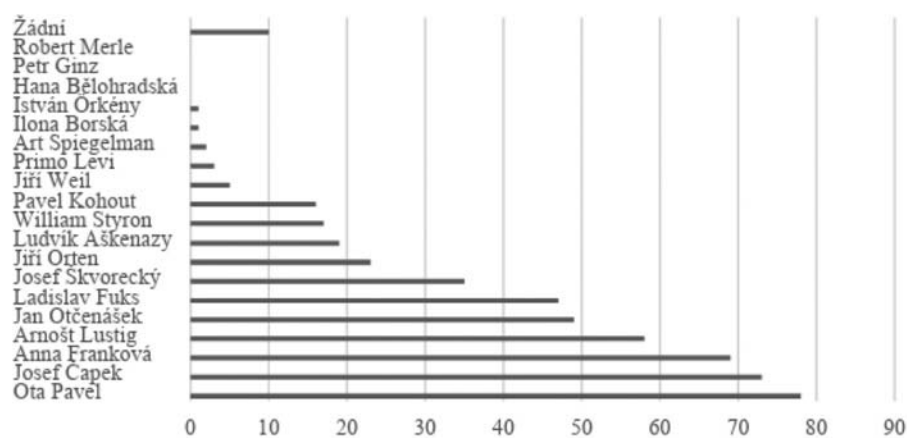


Source. Own research.

The strong representation of the subject Czech Language and Literature is related to the answers to the questionnaire item in which we asked which authors were introduced to the respondents in connection with the literary representation of the Shoah at the primary school they attended (see Figure 2). The selection of authors was based on an analysis of reading books for the lower-secondary schools that had an endorsement from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in 2020—see Mašát, 2017, 2021).

Figure 2

Writers presented in relation to the Shoah

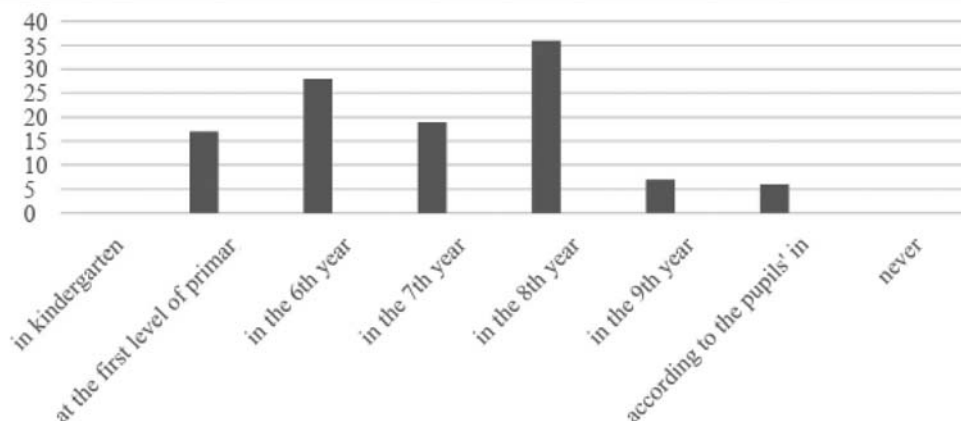


Source. Own research.

As can be seen from the graphic representation, in the context of literary education, the respondents were mostly acquainted with authors whose works about the Shoah were anchored in the canon of Czech literature.

Figure 3

A year in which the topic of the Shoah should be introduced to pupils

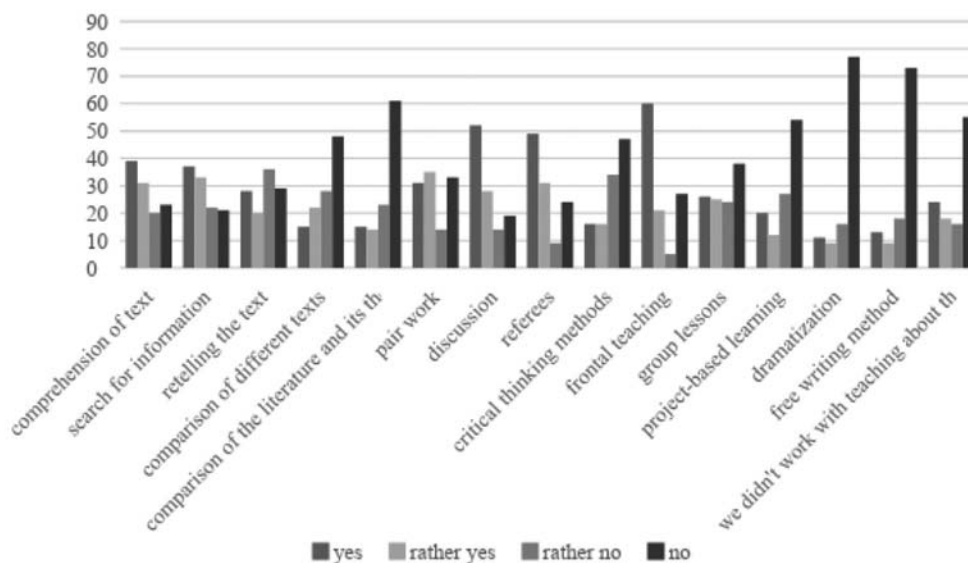


Source. Own research.

As Figure 3 shows, the respondents mostly agree that the Shoah should be presented to pupils in 8th year of primary school. This finding is not surprising; it corresponds with the anchoring of the term Holocaust in the *Framework Curriculum for Primary Education*. What is surprising is the finding that none of the respondents chose the option *in kindergarten* and the option *first grade of primary school* received only seventeen choices. These findings are consistent with our belief in the a priori negation of teachers and student teachers of the integration of the Shoah event into the teaching of younger pupils. This is most likely related to ignorance of appropriate methods for presenting defined events to these groups of students, ignorance of the materials provided by institutions dealing with the legacy of the Shoah (e.g., the *Terezin Initiative Institute*, *Yad Vashem*, the *Jewish Museum in Prague*, etc.), or a desire to protect these age groups of students from the horrors of the Shoah (e.g., gas chamber presentations). At this point, we consider it necessary to draw attention to the fact that the events of the Shoah should be presented to pupils in kindergarten and primary school in terms of feelings (e.g. stigmatisation) and atmosphere (fear), not explicitly in terms of persecution, imprisonment, and murder. At this level, it can be achieved that these pupils perceive the Shoah as something bad that must be prevented. In the following grades, this level of internalisation can be built upon and developed.

At the end of the presentation of the selected results, we present the respondents' experiences with the methods used in connection with the presentation of the Shoah at the primary school they attended.

Figure 4
Methods used in connection with the Shoah



Source. Own research.

DISCUSSION

Most respondents believe that the Shoah phenomenon is only suitable for integration at the lower-secondary school. This preconception stems mainly from the respondents' previous experience in primary schools, where most of them have been introduced to the events of the Shoah at that level of education, and also from the form of acquiring knowledge about the phenomenon. In primary schools, the defined phenomenon was in most cases presented through textbooks focused on the interpretation of the relevant historical stage with emphasis on dates, names, or events. Most of the respondents were not aware that the events of the Shoah mainly bring emotions and feelings, the internalisation of which, with a suitably chosen method, can be started as early as kindergarten.

According to the respondents' answers, the issue of the Shoah is suitable for inclusion in the teaching of History, which is related to the anchoring of the concept of the Holocaust in the curriculum of this subject in 8th grade. At this point, we consider it important to note that within the framework of *Homeland History*, pupils are also introduced to selected aspects of twentieth-century Czech history. The significant representation of the answers 'Czech Language and Literature' is undoubtedly related to the extent to which the relevant literary examples are used in the reading books for the lower-secondary schools. This fact is also related to the degree of representation of authors with whom future first-grade primary school teachers were introduced in primary schools, i.e. authors who were so called time-tested. We are of the opinion that, despite the undeniable quality of many of these books, they are not the most suitable for primary school pupils,

mainly because of a certain distance in the view of life held by adolescent readers and the protagonists of the works represented in the readers. It is important that the fiction with which pupils are introduced is primarily intentional. We believe that these narratives are adapted to implicit readers by their composition, themes, etc., which can increase the potential of their acquisition of the desired value system.

Within the presentation of the Shoah, the most used were the so-called traditional methods and forms of teaching. We are convinced that in the context of the current events of the Shoah, these experiences (preconceptions) of students of teaching for the first stage of primary schools should be transformed, not only in the context of the presentation of the defined events. As we have already outlined, the emphasis in presenting the phenomenon should be on the development of students' critical thinking (the ability to recognise relevant information and its sources and to critically evaluate it), to discuss various aspects related to the Shoah and to be able to defend their opinions and, last but not least, to be able to express their opinions in written and spoken form. This corresponds to the aim of basic education, i.e. "to help [pupils] to form and gradually develop key competences and to provide a sound basis for general education oriented mainly towards situations close to life and practical action" (Faltýn et al., 2021, p. 8).

The presented research investigation has its limitations. We are aware that the statements of the respondents cannot be generalised due to their relatively small number, however, a certain direction in the issue under study can be traced. It would be interesting to develop the presented research on a qualitative level, in which the respondents could expand their answers in the quantitative phase or to observe the possible transformation of the preconceptions of the Shoah in the future teachers and after their entry into teaching practice.

Recommendations

Based on the presented results, we have made some recommendations for the presentation of the Shoah phenomenon in educational practice.

- When presenting the topic of the Shoah, focus on portraying the atmosphere and feelings;
- Include the Shoah in all levels of institutional education;
- Introduce current intentional works and translations to pupils in the literary representation of the Shoah;
- When presenting the Shoah, use teaching methods that develop the skills, abilities, and competences that pupils will use in everyday life;
- When presenting the Shoah, use materials provided by Czech and international institutions dealing with the legacy of the Shoah;
- Not to present pupils with ready-made, comprehensive knowledge about the events of the Shoah, but to lead them to verify the information, to search for arguments and to formulate their own well-founded opinions.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we presented partial results of a quantitative research investigation, the aim of which was to find out the preconceptions of students of the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc in the field of integration of the Shoah phenomenon into teaching in primary schools. We started from the assumption that future teachers to some extent transfer teaching patterns into their own teaching practice. On the basis of the results of the research investigation, it will be possible to intervene in a targeted way in the area of adequate and up-to-date inclusion of the phenomenon of the Shoah (Holocaust) in the teaching (not only) in Czech primary schools, in the direction of the message that the defined line of the Second World War provides to society in the twenty-first century.

A total of 113 students of teaching for the first level of primary schools, both in full-time and combined form of study, participated in the research. We are aware that the results of the research cannot be generalised based on the responses of the defined sample of respondents, but we believe that they can point to certain obstacles that stand between primary school students and the issue of the Shoah. We consider the most significant limitation to be the fact that the respondents do not consider it appropriate to integrate the events of the Shoah into the teaching of the first stage of primary school. In our opinion, this is due to their preconceptions from the teaching about the topic in the primary school they attended. We believe that the practices of hidden and open stigmatisation and persecution of certain groups of the population, which culminated in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, must be emphasised in the present day, with a focus on developing pupils' ability to recognise these practices. It is important to recognise that the Shoah is not only a murderous mechanism, but also an atmosphere of fear, ignorance, or expectation of the unknown. It is in these points that we see the possibilities of implementing the defined phenomenon in the teaching of the first stage of primary schools or kindergartens.

In this paper we tried to point out selected possibilities of implementing the Shoah issue into teaching at the first level of Czech primary schools, based on the identified preconceptions of future teachers at the respective level of education. The results point to the fact that the transformation of the perception of the defined events, and the related broader possibilities of their application in Czech institutional teaching, will be quite complex. Primarily, it is necessary to begin to perceive the Shoah also in a certain transcendental, visceral level and, based on the internalisation of the resulting feelings, to begin to build pupils' awareness of the importance of democracy, freedom or tolerance.

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