

***“Why Does Wearing A Yellow Bib Make Us Different”?: A Case Study of Explaining Discrimination in a West of Scotland Secondary (High) School***

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## **Abstract**

*This paper reports on and discusses one Scottish secondary school's attempts to develop an understanding of discrimination and prejudice with S1 (Year 7 in England) pupils using a simulation based on a truncated version of Jane Elliott's 'Blue eyes Brown Eyes' experiment of the 1960s. The research questions were:*

- Did the pupils learn anything about discrimination from the day as a whole?*
- Did they remember what they have learned over a period of time?*
- Did the 'winter babies' gain more from the day than the 'summer babies'?*
- Was the experiment worthwhile?*

*The paper first, discusses the issue of using simulations in general and specifically with pupils aged about 12 years; second, explains how the simulation was set up; third, reports on the pupil perception of the simulation – both the 'victims' and the 'bystanders'; and fourth attempts to draw some tentative conclusions.*

### **Introduction: Teaching the Holocaust**

Previous research in secondary schools (Carrington and Short 1997; Brown and Davies 1998; Short et al 1998; Davies 2000; Hector, 2000; Totten, 2000; Ben-Peretz, 2003; Schweber, 2003; Maitles and Cowan, 2004; Cowan and Maitles, 2007) provides evidence that Holocaust education can make a significant contribution to citizenship in developing pupils' awareness of human rights issues and genocide, the concepts of stereotyping and scapegoating, and general political literacy, such as the exercise of power in local, national and global contexts. Landau (1989) 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'. Short (2003) 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.

In the Scottish context, Holocaust education is not a named subject or topic in the Scottish curriculum and its teaching depends on individual school policy, and/or interested teachers who integrate it into the curriculum (Maitles & Cowan, 1999; Maitles and Cowan, 2006). This means that unlike their UK peers in England and Wales, or their European peers in France or Germany, Scottish students may not have studied the Holocaust per se at all in school. They may however, have encountered relevant themes through Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies, History, Modern Studies and/or Citizenship Education. However it is less likely that secondary teachers in Scotland will have participated in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in developing their knowledge of and skills in teaching the Holocaust than their counterparts in England, as CPD tends to be heavily focused on curriculum requirements. Thus, because Holocaust Education is part of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, specialist courses are offered (HEDP, 2010; Jewish Museum, 2010); nonetheless, there is plenty of scope and flexibility within the Scottish curriculum to teach the Holocaust. The three initiatives which have seriously impacted on Holocaust education in Scotland are the introduction of a national Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) since 2001, the development of Citizenship Education since 2003 and the Lessons From Auschwitz Project organized by the

Holocaust Education Trust, which involves two senior students from each secondary school visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum and then engaging in ‘next steps’ activities on return. HMD activities have led to primary and secondary school curricular resources using Holocaust survivor testimonies of people who came to live in Scotland (LTS, 2000; LTS, 2002a), annual school and community resources and local authorities and schools commemorating HMD. Citizenship education has encouraged Holocaust teaching by providing a suitable context for attainment in many key areas such as human rights, the need for mutual respect, tolerance and understanding of a diverse and multi-cultural, multi-ethnic Scotland. It should be noted that Citizenship Education in Scotland is not a separate subject but is permeated throughout the curriculum (LTS, 2002b). Further, the new Curriculum for Excellence includes ‘responsible citizenship’ as one of the four purposes of the curriculum for students from 3-18 (Scottish Executive, 2004). To achieve this, students are required to: ‘have respect for others’; ‘develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland’s place in it’; and ‘develop informed, ethical views of complex issues’. There is a wide range of research that supports the positive contribution of Holocaust education to developing students’ understanding aspects of citizenship (Cowan & Maitles, 2007). The Lessons from Auschwitz Project has meant that, in most secondary schools, events have been organized in the school and/or in the community to show the horrors and lessons of genocide.

Teaching about the Holocaust and genocide can thus be tremendously valuable but it is also tremendously difficult. Nowhere is this clearer than in using simulations in the classroom. The most famous simulation is that of Jane Elliott (Peters, 1987). Known as Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes, the experiment was designed to show the impact of discrimination on both victims and bystanders. In response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. over forty years ago, Jane Elliott devised the controversial ‘Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes’ exercise. This, now famous, exercise labels participants as inferior or superior based solely upon the color of their eyes and exposes them to the experience of being a minority. It is still in use and has been the subject of much debate, discussed below. Similarly, the Gestapo Holocaust simulation, devised by Raymond Zwerin and Audrey Friedman Marcus in 1976 has been the subject of controversy (Fallace, 2007). And the controversy surrounding using simulations has

continued since (Narvaez, 1998) and indeed is still a live issue in the present day (Short News, 2006; Elliott, 2009).

The critique is that simulation debases the memory of the Holocaust and does not reflect what really went on. As one example, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in the US called upon his colleagues to be involved in the experiment on discrimination as ‘a day of sheer pleasure for the staff being themselves as Nazi officers and becoming Adolfs...because staff need the stress relief and entertainment’ (Elliott, 2009).

Critiques come from individuals and organisations heavily committed to Holocaust education. Dawidowicz (1990) and Totten (2000) for example argue that simulations reflect poor pedagogy and oversimplify Holocaust history. Totten is particularly critical. He argues that ‘For students to walk away thinking that they have either experienced what a victim went through or have a greater understanding of what the victims suffered is shocking in its naivety. Even more galling is for teachers to think that they have provided their students with a true sense of what the victims lived through--and/or to think they have at least approximated the horror and terror the victims experienced’ (2002, 122). The Anti-Defamation League (ADL, 2006) describe one simulation from Florida, where children were very distressed, crying and one child reported that ‘The only thing I found out today is that I don’t want to be Jewish’. The organisation outlines the critique of using simulations as trivialising the experience, stereotyping group behaviour, distorting historical reality, reinforcing negative views, impeding critical analysis and disconnecting the Holocaust from its historical context. In other words, it can have impact exactly the opposite of what we might want.

The United State Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, which issues advice to many teachers and educators about teaching the Holocaust, argues that ‘the problem with trying to simulate situations about the Holocaust is that complex events and actions are over-simplified and students are left with a skewed view of history...simulation games can lead to a trivialisation of the subject matter’ (USHMM, 2009). Further, there is a fear of psychological scarring shown by the blue eyes/brown eyes children experiencing stress and disengagement for a period afterwards (Killen et al., 2006; Power et al., 2007). Finally, the simulation strategy can be used without giving the students either the historical understanding of the rise

to power of the Nazis or an understanding of anti-Semitism (Hammond, 2001). The Jews are seen solely as victims, leading to patronizing feelings of pity (Illingworth, 2000). Alternative strategies to simulation tend to involve survivor and eyewitness testimony, primary source material, reflective writing experiences, in class discussions and incorporating the Holocaust into a wider study of , for example World War II or contemporary world problems. (ADL, 2006; USHMM, 2009)

Nonetheless, there are those who argue (Ben-Peretz, 2004; Drake, 2008; Narvaez, 1987; Ruben, 1999; Schweber, 2003) that using simulation is an issue of pedagogy not principle and that if conducted appropriately it can be very powerful and help the students consider the Holocaust from the perspectives of bystanders, victims and perpetrators. The USHMM (2009), whilst being critical of simulations, does point out to teachers that where ‘designed to explore varying aspects of human behaviour, such as fear, scapegoating, conflict-resolution and difficult decision making’ they can be valuable. Jane Elliott, who is an advocate of the simulations, expresses caution. She argues that it needs experienced teachers, extensive debriefing, experienced facilitators and a strong rapport between pupils and teachers for it to work (Drake, 2008).

On a related and equally contentious point for educators, there is the issue of the appropriate age to develop these ideas with young people. 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 (in Short and Reed, 2004) cites a number of Piaget’s critics who have influenced teachers to raise their expectations of children’s abilities. The contribution of Holocaust education to citizenship for younger students includes developing pupils’ understanding of justice, stereotyping and discrimination (Short and Carrington, 1991; Maitles and Cowan, 1999; Cowan and Maitles, 2007) 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 (1999) on the grounds that the Holocaust is inappropriate and too complex for this age group to study, and by Kochan (1989) who objects to its teaching to the ‘immature and unsophisticated’ claiming that such teaching can have deleterious consequences for pupils. Schweber (2003) maintains

that we have to be vigilant of ‘curricular creep’ – teaching the topic to an ever younger age group – and that she felt that her Grade 3 class in USA (aged about 10 years) was too young for the simulation used. These viewpoints are 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 (Cowan and Maitles, 2002) and by studies examining the impact of teaching the Holocaust to young people’s values and attitudes (Cowan and Maitles, 2007; Maitles and Cowan, 2004).

The point is that to engage in this type of activity as the school in this paper did, carries risks and is a continuing feature of debate. Nonetheless, following much discussion in the planning team, the genocide awareness day, which included examining the Nazi Holocaust and Rwandan genocide, (as part of a 12 day programme of citizenship education which took all S1 pupils -- the first year of secondary school, aged about 12 years, some 140 in total -- off formal timetable for two weeks to follow a series of citizenship initiatives) was to have a simulation in it – the exercise discussed in the opening section first conducted by Jane Elliott in 1968 and known as ‘Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes’. In the case of our 2009 school, the pre-determined pupils chosen were ‘winter babies’ and the 20 of them, with their approval and parental approval, were to wear yellow bibs and were ‘discriminated against’ by staff and visiting speakers for the day. There was a pseudo-scientific explanation at the morning plenary to the whole year group that ‘winter babies’ were holding back society and all other pupils. The object of the exercise was to show the pupils how one of the UN stages of genocide – identifying the victims and encouraging discrimination against them – can develop. And, further, how easy it is to slip into the role of discriminator and discriminated. Whilst it is not necessary to link the Elliott experiment to genocide per se, the decision of the school was to link the two and try to suggest the ultimate horrors that can develop from discrimination.

The pupils progressed through a series of workshops during the course of the day. The workshops focused on the Holocaust, the stages of genocide, the Rwandan genocide, Anne Frank and the senior students’ visit to Auschwitz as part of the Holocaust

Education Trust/Scottish Government funded Lesson from Auschwitz Project. The pupils came from a variety of primary schools and some (approximately 30%) had no prior knowledge of the Holocaust other than Holocaust Memorial Day presentation in their Primary 6/7 class. Thus, the school decision to attempt the simulation as part of genocide awareness day in which 2 of the 4 workshops were directly about the Holocaust and one about the Rwandan genocide (of which the pupils had no direct background knowledge) could be seen as problematic. There was a full debriefing plenary at the end of the day.

The aims of the research were to find out:

- Did the pupils learn anything about discrimination from the day as a whole?
- Did they remember what they have learned over a period of time?
- Did the ‘winter babies’ gain more from the day than the ‘summer babies’?
- Was the experiment worthwhile?

The article will examine the teaching of holocaust simulations in schools, the methodology and sample of the study, the responses of the pupils to their experiences and will draw some tentative conclusions.

### **Methodology and Sample**

Having been invited in by the school to assess the whole citizenship programme, I felt it was important to also evaluate the simulation experience. The methodology for this discrimination exercise was to involve observations on the day noting the discrimination and pupil responses and hold both individual and group interviews with winter and summer babies, (all the winter babies – 20 in total) and 20 summer babies selected at random, although gender parity was sought and achieved. The questions in the interviews were designed to be open-ended and to let the pupils give their thoughts and experiences. In particular we wanted to find out what they had taken from the simulation exercise and what they thought of that particular pedagogical tool. Second, their thoughts on the universal lessons of the experience. Third, how had the simulation impacted on their attitudes towards citizenship issues such as respect and understanding. Fourth, their thinking on what they could have done to challenge the discrimination. And, finally we wanted to explore the general memory of the experience to see whether this kind of learning leads to longer lasting



impact. Parental consent to the whole process was sought and given, and the pupils were informed fully and openly, as part of seeking their consent, as to their rights in the process. Anonymity was guaranteed to parents, school, pupils and the questionnaire was itself anonymous. This guaranteed the anonymity but made targeted individual follow up to further develop our understanding impossible. To minimize ethical issues arising from this kind of pedagogy and to allay parental and pupil fears, the 'winter baby' participants and their parents were fully informed of the plan and consent from pupils and parents was sought and obtained. Where parents and/or pupils were worried, they would not take part; all pupils and parents gave consent. The recorded interviews were undertaken approximately 3 weeks after the event to check event recall and its impact on students back on a busy S1 schedule. Interviews and questionnaires focused on two main areas: first, memory of the experience of the discrimination simulation; and second, the most important lesson they thought they obtained from it.

## **Findings**

Even as an experienced educator and researcher, following one group of the winter babies was quite disconcerting. Although the teachers and outside speakers on the day were never brutal, there was an undertone of discrimination in every workshop. The winter babies were made to sit on the floor, were not allowed to ask or answer questions, were not allowed to talk, did not in any meaningful way participate in activities and were last out of the room, thus last in the queue for lunch and toilet breaks. We also noted that during breaks and lunch and moving from one workshop to another, the winter babies tended to stay as a group – they quickly forged a group identity. The most controversial and disturbing point arrived during the drama workshop, running from 2-3 pm in the gym hall. In a highly interactive lesson that involved role play, drumming and games to highlight discrimination, the winter babies were completely excluded and made to stand quietly in the corner watching. At the end of this, the experience, coupled with some snubbing at lunch, caused two of the winter babies' girls to be overcome with frustration; they became very emotional in their responses.

## **Winter Babies thoughts of the day**

From discussions with the winter babies, a number of points stood out, particularly when they were asked to describe what they got from the day and the experiment as a whole. First, the 10 boys in particular showed primarily anger at not being listened to and being ignored; the girls were less angry but more upset that their friends had turned against them and indeed they claimed they had found out something about friendship. Comments such as ‘That you see who your true friends are and you shouldn’t treat people like dirt because you put on a yellow [bib]’ were made. In particular, most of the girls were very disappointed that some of their friends had not wanted to be with them at break or lunch because they were wearing the bib ‘I learned who my true friends were and that you should like everyone for who and what they are on the inside’. Indeed, this very point was a clear issue for them and was one of the key reasons why a number, particularly girls, were, by the end of the day, beginning to find things difficult and were becoming upset. One commented that she felt the school ‘had turned against them’. However, as these comments were made in the group interviews, there could be an issue relating to peer pressure; unfortunately this point was not followed up in the individual interviews. Second, a majority of the winter babies did take more general lessons from the day, particularly regarding discrimination and human rights. One commented that he learned ‘All about how the Holocaust must have been horrible for the Jews’ *and another that* ‘I know how the Holocaust must have felt for the Jews’. It needs to be pointed out that it has been argued (Dawidowicz, 1990; Totten, 2002; Lindquist, 2006) that this is intellectually impossible – these pupils could not feel or experience what it might have been like for the Jews.

Nonetheless, an empathy for the suffering of victims of genocide can be seen as a relatively positive step. One of the winter babies indeed merged these two points through the comment ‘That it was very hard for Jewish people and also who my real friends are’. Third, a number also took a clearly historical understanding ‘....it showed us what it was like in the olden days when Hitler was in charge of Germany’ and ‘It also helped us see more clearly into the lives of others affected by the Holocaust’. Fourth, there were also universalist lessons drawn. One said ‘You should treat everybody in the world with respect and in some countries things like this were still going on’; another that ‘Respect other people even if they are different’. Finally, there were some who developed a stronger understanding of tolerance and understanding

‘Not to bully people just because they are different’ and ‘Everyone is equal’ were comments made. Again, there can be an argument that we don’t want pupils to ‘respect’ all opinions – should we respect homophobes or racists or sexists, for example? But in this context of genocide, there is a case to see this as a favorable outcome.

### **Summer Babies thoughts of the day**

For the summer babies (ie those who did not face discrimination) there were some similar comments. Some of them were angry or upset at the way the winter babies were treated. One commented that ‘I felt a bit sad because I was watching other people get treated like dirt’, another that she was ‘...upset that I could not play, talk or sit next to my friends; Just because they were winter babies’. Some also commented that they were not happy at the teachers ‘I was annoyed with teachers because they were unfair and wouldn’t let them join in’. A third group did take universalist lessons. One boy said ‘It’s terrible that things like this still go on’, a girl that ‘.....some people get bullied for their religion or where they come from and this is wrong’. Another commented that she took from the day that ‘given the tiniest reason people will turn against each other’. These comments are interesting and relevant in the light of the UN stages of genocide suggesting that the isolation of the ‘other’ is a key factor in the development of a genocidal mentality. Yet, and on a perhaps more disturbing note, two male pupils felt that the experience had not impacted on them in a negative way and indeed that they felt they had gained out of the lowering of status for some of their classmates. One commented that it was ‘Good because we were important’ and another that he had enjoyed being ‘in charge of the winter babies’. This point is further discussed below.

### **Memory of the day**

Asking them to recall events from some weeks ago and, in particular, how they felt about it, was interesting but problematic. First, they had astonishing recall of it, able to tell much of what went on and even remembering small details of the day. This ties in with general research about active learning which suggests that because of student involvement, it is ‘deeper’ learning and makes a greater impact (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003; Luff, 2000; Maitles, 2005; Maitles and Gilchrist, 2006; Ritchie, 1999; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Save the Children, 2000 and 2001). This is not

something new. John Dewey argued some 90 years ago ‘give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results’ (Dewey, 1915). In that sense, there was great success from the day as a whole. However, it is harder to come to a generalised conclusion about whether this could have been achieved without the simulation. The pupils remembered much of the workshops, which were themselves interactive and would have been so without the simulation. More research will be needed to be able to develop further conclusions.

### **Discussion**

It is important not to claim too much from this small scale case study research. It should perhaps be pointed out at this stage that 25 pupils (some 18%) complained to members of staff, including senior management, during the day that they were unhappy about how the winter babies were being treated and that they regarded it as unfair. Given the authoritarian nature of a Scottish secondary school and that the whole experiment was sprung on them on the day, this was, I believe, a positive sign. It is not common in Scottish secondary schools for pupils to challenge the decisions of teachers and the Headteacher; that a number were willing to question the discrimination suggests they were uncomfortable with it. When asked in the group interviews why they couldn’t organise anything to challenge the discrimination, the responses varied from ‘we didn’t know how’ to ‘what could we do?’ to ‘the teachers all seemed to think it was alright’. A further interesting development might have been for a few of the teachers to have stated some opposition to the policy and then we might have been able to observe whether the pupils might have seen that as a green light to organise, however, this was not part of the exercise.

From the answers of both the winter babies and summer babies, it can be deduced that the experiment had more of an impact on the winter babies as they were able to better relate their experiences to the knowledge of the Holocaust. Although it could also be that these 20 pupils might have held these views before the day of the experiment, it is reasonable to assume that their experiences of being discriminated against had some impact. When questioned, they had stronger empathy with the Jews during the Nazi Holocaust or Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide and showed a stronger understanding of how it must have felt to be treated as second class citizens, although the caveat is that,

as pointed out above, it can be in a patronising, even trivial, manner. Further, from their answers it is clear that a number of these S1 pupils learned a lot about the Holocaust and about the treatment of others; they spoke of treating everyone equally and with respect. The fact that two summer babies felt empowered by being treated in a superior manner is itself interesting. It raises complex psychological issues, discussed by Smetana (2006) in relation to a proportion of the population in these circumstances. Baum (2008) suggests that the population in most societies can be characterised by a Bell Curve type response – with the non-victimised in the society being pulled in different directions; some will help and oppose discrimination, others will aid the persecutors, and the majority will become ‘bystanders’ who can be pulled in either direction, depending on the circumstances. Whilst Baum attempts to determine the response in an examination of innate or genetically inherited attributes, there is of course an argument which sees environment and society as the key determinant. Either way, our admittedly very small sample found some 90% unhappy or uncomfortable with what was going on the day as a whole, and, as noted above, some 18% of the whole S1 cohort complained about the discrimination; this we welcome.

However, in line with research into other simulations, outlined above in this article, the debriefing is crucial. In this case, the pupils were much more empowered to speak out when it became clear that the adults in the room were both encouraging them to do so and were themselves reflecting on and sometimes disagreeing about some of the issues. The discussion, for example, on organising to challenge the discrimination involved a large number of pupils, encouraged by the teachers themselves disagreeing on how to interpret that 25 pupils had approached members of staff unhappy about the discrimination but had not had the confidence to go beyond. Teachers at the exercise debrief were divided as whether to see the glass as half full or half empty. This was a confident, questioning debrief; it was what was required to draw some lessons from the day. However, a caveat must be made here: this pedagogy does not challenge the wider issues relating to institutional discrimination within a school. The parameters were set tightly in that discrimination was seen in a narrower focus with the emphasis on personal responsibility rather than challenging an overall ethos.

Finally, we asked the pupils in our sample whether they thought the experience was worthwhile. All of the pupils, both winter and summer babies, thought the experiment, though it was upsetting for some, was 'a good idea'. Objectively, there is no doubt that the day and the simulation experience left a major impression on these 12 year olds and it may be that even though the research is divided on using simulations per se, the pedagogy of how it is used is the key factor rather than the tool itself.

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