
When I was growing up in the 1960s and early 70s in the UK, the Shoah was not yet “institutionalised”, to borrow a phrase from Erik Cohen’s 2013 publication, *Identity and Pedagogy – Shoah Education in Israeli State Schools*. There were virtually no education units or curricula related to the study of that period taught in Jewish schools or synagogue classes in the UK. As a Jewish teenager in London in a non-Jewish high school, the Shoah was not part of my education at all, a situation that was also mirrored in Jewish schools in Israel in those decades. In the UK now, all teenagers study the Holocaust as a Unit in the National History curriculum, and it is used as a lens through which to teach universal values of tolerance, anti-racism and democracy.

Shoah education in Israel in the first decade of the twenty-first century is the subject of the research and the bulk of this book. The development of Shoah education in Israel has moved from the first steps of designating a National Day of Mourning in 1951 (Yom HaShoah) to a broadening and diversification of texts and curricula which emphasize both the specific and universal aspects of Shoah.

The first part of Cohen’s book traces the history of approaches to teaching the Shoah in Israel and compares this to other Jewish centres around the world. But the main focus for this book is the National Survey of Shoah Education in Israel, a major nation-wide survey on Shoah Education in Israeli state schools, conducted by the author between 2007 and 2009. This was the first national study of the issue in the Israeli state system and was designed to give as broad, detailed and complete a picture as possible, by surveying a large and diverse population, employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Surveys were sent to principals, teachers and students, in high, and junior high schools of a wide variety throughout Israel.

Cohen’s sample size was sufficiently large and diverse for reliable analysis and recommendations to be drawn, and the second half of the book explains and reflects on the enormous quantity of data gathered. By and large, according to this study, Israeli schools appear to be doing a good job. The author shows how highly Shoah education was evaluated by principals, teachers and students alike. Principals see Shoah education as successfully imparting Jewish, Israeli and universal values. Teachers are satisfied with the training they receive, and the academic core is the same in religious and general schools. The investment in Shoah education

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in schools is significant, and Cohen highlights that this is important and necessary because in Israel the school is the primary setting for learning about the Shoah. In grades 7-10, an average of 15-20 hours a year are spent on Shoah education in schools, and this rises to 40-45 hours in grade 11. In the UK, where although Shoah education is taught to some extent in every state high school, the locus for in depth Shoah education for Jewish students is as likely to be the synagogue or the Youth Movement as it is the school. In Israel on the other hand, the impact of the youth movement on Shoah education is “apparently marginal” (Cohen p103).

One of the interesting, though not surprising, results of Cohen’s research is found in the chapter on “The Journey to Poland”. The pupils’ rate the trip to Poland and testimonies of survivors as the most effective means of learning about the Shoah. First hand sources are well known as highly effective ways of transmitting almost any subject. In the UK for example, all the mainstream Jewish high schools run Poland trips for their older teenagers. In Israel, a significant and growing number of 12th graders also go to Shoah sites in Poland on school tours. Cohen calls this a “sort of civil-religious pilgrimage”(192). The itineraries are designed to teach about the Shoah, impart strong emotional experiences and involve participants in commemorative symbolic acts. These school journeys are part of a growing trend of “Shoah tourism” among Jews both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Cohen makes parallels between these Jewish heritage tours and the group tours to Israel for Diaspora teens, a phenomenon he researched in 2008. Whilst there are many similarities, Cohen finds that over 80% of Israeli youth said they intended to go to Poland when in grade 12. The only barrier is a financial one, whereas in Cohen’s previous research, he found that barriers to going on a group tour to Israel were cultural and religious, as well as financial.

Cohen concludes that development of Shoah education has been an extended process, reflecting changes in the politics and society in Israel, and even within the national school system, there is not uniformity of approach. He acknowledges that there is one area for further, in-depth research: the first is Shoah education among “other” populations in Israel – the ultra-Orthodox and the 1.5 million Arab citizens of Israel.

Apart from the enormously rich collection of data analysed in this book, Cohen provides the researcher and the graduate student with invaluable role modelling in methodology and surveying in particular. The structure of the questionnaires, for principals, teachers and students, all shown in full in the appendices, provide a very helpful blueprint for anyone planning to run education surveys. As well as showing great clarity, the structure and content of the questions are extremely useful
transferable tools. They teach survey design and should be required reading on any doctoral research programme.

In addition, Cohen’s use of Smallest Space Analysis (SSA), which is a multidimensional data analysis technique based on facet theory, is enhanced by a very clear explanation of this particular framework and approach.

In 2009, the Holocaust Education Department in the UK conducted a parallel piece of research on Shoah education in state schools in Britain. More than 2000 teachers participated in an on-line survey and consultations took place with representatives from more than twenty UK educational institutions, both Jewish and general. The findings of this research resonate widely with Cohen’s work, and the UK study is cited in Cohen’s very comprehensive, impressive bibliography. There are of course, specific issues that illustrate the particularistic nature of teaching the Shoah in Israel, to Jewish teenagers, in Jewish schools and Cohen deals with these within his findings. From analysing the precise differences between the general term “Holocaust” and the Jewish term “Shoah”, to identifying the specific issues related to Shoah teaching in Jewish Israeli society, Cohen acknowledges that teaching about the Shoah has a distinct place and purpose within Israel.

Cohen concludes with a summary of suggestions for further development of Shoah education in Israeli schools. One of these suggestions advocates bringing informal and experiential activities to enrich the more traditional cognitive teaching and learning that takes place in schools. The trip to Poland, already cited, is one of these methods, and engaging with survivors and hearing their stories is another.

As we become further and further removed from the Shoah as an event within personal memory, so teaching about it in school becomes more and more important, in a personal, a collective and a universal sense. Cohen’s book is a significant addition to our knowledge of teaching and learning, remembrance and education. It is more than merely a critique and exploration of an area of the Israeli High School curriculum. It is a thorough, complete exposition of the process of coming to terms with, and understanding one of the most challenging eras in modern society.

**Dr Helena Miller**

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