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Lighting Candles in the Darkness: An Exploration of Commemorative Acts with British Teenagers at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

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Abstract: Every year around 3000 British school pupils and teachers visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum as participants on a Lessons from Auschwitz Project organized by the Holocaust Educational Trust. Each visit ends with a memorial ceremony held at the end of the railway tracks at Birkenau. This article analyses interview and survey data from participating students and educators to explore their experiences of these ceremonies. The research findings indicate that the context and content of the ceremony are significant for both groups, with a general consensus that the ceremony is an important and appropriate way to end the day visit to Poland and the museum. The students' responses also particularly raise issues around their emotional engagement with the ceremony and the impact it had on them in this way. In conclusion, this article suggests how similar reflective spaces might be created in other educational contexts at similar sites of memory.

Keywords: Holocaust education; remembrance; commemoration; collective worship; Auschwitz-Birkenau; lessons from Auschwitz



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1. Introduction

In comparison with its European neighbors, the United Kingdom (UK) has a very different geographical and historical relationship with the events of the Holocaust. Yet in 2019 over 200,000 visitors at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum came from the UK, constituting the second largest group nationally (Bartyzel and Sawicki 2020). Many of these will have been young people on organized educational visits with their schools, colleges or community groups (Nesfield 2015). This paper explores the particular experiences of some of these young people on such an organized educational visit to the museum.

The topic of the Holocaust has been a unit within the National Curriculum in the UK since its introduction in state funded schools in 1991. In 2000 the UK was an original signatory of the Stockholm Declaration and subsequently became a founding member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF)—now known as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) was marked for the first time in 2001, although the creation of the day itself was not without controversy at the time (see for example Cesarani 2001; Bloxham 2002; Kushner 2004). Since curriculum content was devolved to the constituent countries of the UK in 1999, the topic of the Holocaust has remained the only compulsory topic of post-1901 history that pupils study in English state funded schools (DfE 2013). In the other countries (Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) the topic is not statutory, but there is evidence that there remains 'a great deal of commitment from teachers to address the subject' in schools (FCO 2012, sct. 19). Consequently, it can be reasonably assumed that most pupils within the UK education system encounter the topic of the Holocaust at some point during their formal education (Pearce and Chapman 2017), as well as through a variety of cultural mediations, such as HMD events, online content, books and films, all of which contribute to and influence their formal learning in school (Gray 2014).

Prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum, teaching about the Holocaust in UK schools was largely 'dependent upon the enthusiasm and knowledge of individual teachers' (Richardson 2012, p. 20). Research conducted in the years either side of its implementation (see for example Fox 1989; Rubenstein and Taylor 1992; Supple 1992; Short 1995) suggested that the Holocaust was principally being taught to achieve anti-racist objectives (Short 1991; Short 1997)—a goal it was arguably failing to achieve. When the UK submitted its Country Report about Holocaust education to the ITF in 2006 it painted a dismal picture, with a lack of evidence or consistency across subjects, school types and regions (ITF 2006). The topic of the Holocaust had been a compulsory subject in History lessons for 12 years at this point, yet the report could often only respond with 'anecdotal evidence' or claims that items were 'impossible to answer' (ITF 2006, scts. 4 and 8, respectively). In response to the dearth of evidence presented, the Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP) was established at London University's Institute of Education with an ambitious goal 'to help address that gap by providing a more comprehensive empirical portrait of Holocaust education in England's secondary schools than has ever existed before' (Pettigrew et al. 2009, p. 10). The subsequent report, compiled from 2108 online surveys and 68 interviews, concluded that teaching about the Holocaust principally occurred in History lessons (as evidenced in 55% of responses) when pupils were in Year 9 (13–14 years of age). However, it also showed that 25% of respondents principally taught the topic in Religious Education lessons, while an array of other subjects (such as English and Drama classes) also contributed to pupils' learning. They found that pupils might encounter the topic across various years of their schooling, as well as in less formal encounters outside of the classroom. While teachers of different subjects appeared to have diverse interests and intentions in their teaching, a perpetrator narrative appeared to be pervasive in English classrooms at that time.

Since the publication of the HEDP report, research within the field of Holocaust education and commemoration in the UK has markedly increased. This has focused mainly on issues concerning pedagogy (see for example, Carrier 2012; Maitles and Cowan 2012; Foster 2013; Gray 2013; Gray 2014; Short 2015; Pettigrew 2017), and on how the Holocaust is commemorated and remembered in British schools and society (see for example, Donnelly 2013; Kushner 2014; Pearce 2014; Richardson 2017; Pearce 2019; Tollerton 2020). Other authors have explored the particularities of researching Holocaust education with young people (Chapman and Hale 2017), and on the appropriateness of teaching the topic in Primary schools (see for example, Cowan and Jones 2019; Richardson 2018; Hale 2020). There has also been a noticeable focus on learning and teaching in Scotland specifically (see for example, Cowan and Maitles 2010; Cowan 2013; Henderson 2013). When the UK submitted its ITF Country Report in 2012 the tone of the content had noticeably changed in the intervening six years—now the country's research culture was described as 'thriving . . . rich and vibrant', while Holocaust education was said to have 'developed enormously in British schools' (FCO 2012, scts. 10 and 13, respectively). In 2016 the HEDP (then renamed as the Centre for Holocaust Education—CHE) published a further report, this time focusing on pupils' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust (Foster et al. 2016). However, the research with over 9500 11–18 year olds cautioned that it had revealed 'some troubling evidence', including the prevalence of some significant 'inaccuracies and misconceptions' (p. 1). Its publication corresponded (perhaps not coincidentally) with that of the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission (Cabinet Office 2015). The Commission's Report—*Britain's Promise to Remember*—warned against a 'failure to learn the lessons of the Holocaust' (p. 10) and called for the founding of 'a striking new Memorial to serve as the focal point for national commemoration of the Holocaust' which, the report said, would 'stand as a permanent affirmation of the values of British Society' (p. 41). However, it was not clear how such an ambitious and nebulous goal might be achieved, particularly given the ever 'evolving nature of society's sensibilities' (Tollerton 2017, p. 16). The planning process for the proposed memorial has suffered numerous delays and protests to date and awaits a final planning permission approval by the government's department for

Housing, Communities and Local Government (following its removal from what had become an uneasy passage through local planning consultation). The much-contested path of the proposed memorial included objections outlined in a letter sent to the planning authorities in October 2020 signed by 43 prominent Holocaust scholars from around the UK. The evident discord about the memorial—its purpose, form and location—perhaps reflects more fundamental problems and ‘compelling questions’ that need to be addressed ‘about the nature of teaching and learning about the Holocaust in this country: its core precepts, its central aims and intended outcomes’ (Pearce and Chapman 2017, p. 232). This paper hopes to make a contribution to this debate at the intersection between considerations around *what* and *how* we should teach about the Holocaust, and how we *memorialise* it with British young people through acts of commemoration at authentic sites (in this case at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum). The results of this study illustrate that such acts are complex and complicating encounters for young people and their educators, and that they have much to tell us about how and why young people might connect with the events of the Holocaust on an emotional (and possibly spiritual) level.

2. Research Context

This study was conducted with school pupils and educators in England and Northern Ireland who had taken part in a *Lessons from Auschwitz* project. As such it is first helpful to explore the following context-specific influences:

- the nature of Religious Education and Collective Worship in UK schools (Section 2.1)
- the structure and aims of *Lessons from Auschwitz* projects (Section 2.2)

2.1. Religious Education and Acts of Collective Worship in UK Schools

In English, Scottish and Welsh schools, Religious Education (RE) is a statutory entitlement for all pupils up to the age of 18, and up to 16 in Northern Ireland (DCSF 2010). Schools are additionally required to offer a daily act of ‘collective worship’ (CW) for their pupils (HMSO 1944, sct. 25.1). Both RE and CW should be ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’ (HMSO 1988, sct. 7.1). These requirements ‘reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian’ (HMSO 1988, sct. 8.3). Debates around the purpose, content and statutory nature of both RE and CW are widespread but are beyond the scope of this paper (see for example, Mogra 2016; Clarke and Woodhead 2018; Cumper and Mawhinney 2018). For the purposes of this study it is enough to note that British students are accustomed to their formal education containing elements of religious, secular, devotional and confessional teaching through RE and CW. Participating in a daily act of CW (in its broadest sense) will be familiar to them from their schooling. This paper regards the commemorative act that is the focus of this study as being akin to a school act of CW and therefore not particularly unusual to them in format (although obviously the particular setting is unfamiliar).

2.2. The Lessons from Auschwitz Project

The Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) was established in 1988 partly as a response to proposals to establish a National Curriculum in the UK (one of the organization’s first achievements was securing the inclusion of the topic of the Holocaust in the draft curriculum documentation). The HET organized its first Lessons from Auschwitz (LfA) project in 1999, based on a format created by Rabbi Barry Marcus of the Central London Synagogue. The rabbi’s original model had been borne out of what he saw as a ‘shocking’ and ‘disappointing’ lack of participation (Critchell 2014, p. 207) by the UK Jewish community in the international ‘March of the Living’ pilgrimage to Poland and Israel (www.motl.org). When the Trust adopted the model, it shared much with its predecessor (including being accompanied by Rabbi Marcus on more than its first one hundred visits). While Critchell argues the first visits taught about the Holocaust ‘through visiting Auschwitz as a form of pilgrimage, much like the March of the Living’ (Critchell 2014, p. 209) the project was in fact clearly defined as an educational programme with seminars either side of the visits from

the outset. Since then the project has grown enormously in scale and has been necessarily ‘recast’ by the Trust to be ‘tailored more broadly for (mostly non-Jewish) British teenagers’ (Tollerton 2020, p. 159). Today, as a result of its origins it has evolved to become arguably something of ‘a hybrid entity’ (Tollerton 2020, p. 165) that aims to fulfill dual roles as both a historical education programme and a commemorative pilgrimage of sorts (although this has never been an explicit aim of the project organizers), based on the principle that ‘hearing is not like seeing’. Given this, it could be argued that the LfA context is not representative of the formal educational settings in the UK outlined in the introduction. However, I would contend that the ‘hybrid’ nature of the LfA project is precisely what makes it an important representative case to study. In the absence of a National Curriculum specification for such visits, the LfA project is the largest government-backed, school-sanctioned, UK-wide initiative sending young people on an educational visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. While the LfA project was not a government-originated enterprise, the constituent administrations of the UK all continue to fund the project. Although the HET is not a political organization, its work with Parliamentarians from across the political spectrum has exerted considerable influence on educational policy—such as ensuring the continued presence of the topic of the Holocaust in the various iterations of the National Curriculum in England (Pearce and Chapman 2017). The Trust has also engaged with wider national discourses around Holocaust education and memorialization in recent years, particularly as a vocal supporter of the proposed new national Holocaust memorial in London, and as an outspoken critic of the rise of antisemitic rhetoric in UK politics. At its annual fundraising dinner, the Trust has welcomed prominent politicians such as former Prime Ministers David Cameron and Tony Blair to speak (from where the former launched plans for his Holocaust Commission in 2013). While association with the Trust arguably provides such politicians with ‘a useful rhetorical prop’ (Tollerton 2020, p. 158) when they wish to evoke Holocaust memory or commemoration, the Trust’s extensive cross-party work undoubtedly contributes to ensuring the financial stability and future of the project.

Since the first LfA project in 1999, over 41,000 British school pupils have participated in such visits. Each project consists of four parts; an orientation seminar, a day visit to Poland, a follow-up seminar, and the production of a ‘next steps’ project as a result of the visit. There are approximately 17 LfA projects each year, from regions throughout the UK. Chartered flights accommodate around 200 students per visit, in 10 small groups led by HET educators. At the end of their day in Poland, all of the participants gather for a memorial service (referred to as the ‘ceremony’ from here on) of around 30 min in duration. This usually takes place on the cobbled area at the end of the railway tracks at Birkenau, in front of the official memorial. The ceremony is led initially by the HET’s Lead Educator (who is a HET Education Officer) who summarizes the day and introduces some reflective pieces, usually read by a group of students from the various groups. The readings include the poems *My Key*, by the Jewish poet Rose Ausländer (1901–1988), *Marzenia/The Dream* by Auschwitz victim Avraham Koplowicz (1930–1944), and *Sh’ma* by survivor Primo Levi (1919–1987). The Lead Educator then hands over to the rabbi (or rebbetzin), who has accompanied the participants during their visit and has led reflections at several points during the day. Where the guides and educators have offered predominantly historical and social perspectives throughout the day, the rabbi will have been able to add a religious viewpoint on the narratives for participants. At the ceremony, the rabbi gives a sermon and leads prayers (including the sounding of a Shofar), before inviting participants to light candles as a mark of memorialization if they wish to. While all participants are present throughout the ceremony, participation in the religious/semi-religious elements is always voluntary.

3. Research Aims

The primary aim of this study was to explore the recollected experiences of young people and their educators at ceremonies held at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum during LfA projects. The study hoped to contribute to existing research concerning teaching

and learning about the Holocaust and its commemoration (Pennell 2018) by offering further understanding of the role played by such acts at sites of this nature. While accepting that this small-scale study cannot offer generalizable findings, it is hoped that analysis of the data will have ‘transferability’ (Denscombe 2014; Coe 2017), to suggest recommendations and considerations for those engaging young people with *similar* commemorative acts in the future. The study was not intended as an evaluation of LfA or the HET per se. The organization ‘works closely with researchers and academics to ensure [their educational materials] are informed by the latest historical research’ (FCO 2012, sct. 16) and several studies can be found elsewhere that explore the impact and effectiveness of the LfA project (see for example, Chapman et al. 2010; Maitles and Cowan 2012; Nesfield 2015; Richardson 2019). Given the legal requirement for acts of CW in British schools, it is reasonable to extrapolate that the “‘marrying” of education and remembrance’ (Pennell 2018, p. 93) that is apparent on LfA projects is widespread with British school pupils visiting similar sites (as can be evidenced from social media posts of such visits to Holocaust sites, the Menin Gate, Ground Zero, etc.). It is the recollected experiences of participants at such ceremonies during LfA projects particularly that are the focus of this study, while the specifics of how LfA frames these events will be considered in greater depth in the discussion that follows.

4. Methodology

In accordance with the study’s aims, a constructionist methodology was employed to explore participants’ experiences (Denscombe 2010; Gergen 2015). The multiple methods chosen aligned with this approach—interviews allowed for in-depth interactions with participants (Kvale 2008), while surveys facilitated access to an additional, geographically more diverse group of participants (Sue and Ritter 2012). The use of multiple methods also enabled enhanced validity as associations and comparisons could be made between findings and data sets (Flick 2008). The respondents represented a purposive sample (Denscombe 2014) since they were identified as having particular knowledge about the topic under scrutiny (Sue and Ritter 2012). To some extent it was also an opportunity sample, since respondents tended to be connected with LfA projects the researcher could access to approach them in person. All were invited to take part in the research through voluntary opt-in by contacting the researcher directly or accessing the online survey. The research was conducted in accordance with BERA (2018) guidelines and project information sheets included information about participants’ right to withdraw at any point. In total, 116 people took part in the study. Surveys were conducted with 58 young people (aged 16–17), with a further 14 interviewed using a semi-structured instrument. All 72 of these young people (who will be referred to as ‘students’ from here on) had taken part in at least the first two parts of a LfA project within the last year. A further 37 surveys were conducted with freelance educators employed by HET on a casual basis to lead small groups and provide educational inputs on LfA visits (whose experiences of these ceremonies might span many years). This group will be referred to as ‘educators’, while the sample as a whole (n109) will be referred to as ‘participants’. It is hoped that the different perspectives (from students and educators) will add both to the discussion of the findings, as well as adding validity through diverse viewpoints.

Interview and survey items were designed in accordance with the constructionist approach taken, and mindful of Seidman’s advice to ‘ask participants to reconstruct, not to remember’ (Seidman 2006, p. 88). Consequently, the phrasing of items asked for participants’ *thoughts* or *reflections* on the events, rather than their *memories* specifically, thus encouraging them to represent their thoughts as reconstructions rather than as certainties. Data was managed using NVivo software for reasons of practicality and security (Bazeley and Jackson 2013), and data was analyzed at a latent level using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model for Thematic Analysis. Within the constructionist approach taken, the researcher’s own role in this process as a co-constructor of the realities being subsequently presented was acknowledged (Taber 2007). The researcher has worked as a freelance educator for the HET for several years and has attended more than 30 of these ceremonies. Consequently,

my own collected experiences were ‘an integral part of the process of producing [the] data’ (Hennink et al. 2020, p. 19). I was part of the social world under investigation, so a reflexive approach was taken to acknowledge and embrace this, whilst attempting to mitigate discernable bias on the part of the researcher (Denscombe 2010). Consequently, this study strives to craft an overall impression from the multiple realities experienced from all of those within (Waring 2017).

5. Research Findings

As a result of the process of data analysis outlined, three themes emerged from the data:

- The *context* of the memorial ceremony had been a significant factor in participants’ recollections.
- The *content* of the memorial ceremony had resonated with participants in a number of ways.
- Their *emotional engagement* with the memorial ceremony was a significant aspect of participants’ recollections (although this theme was far more evident amongst the students than the educators).

These themes are explored in detail below, followed by a discussion of the implications they raise within a wider critical consideration of the context of the LfA project structure. Each theme considers the responses of students and educators together, to reflect on both inter-relationships and variance between the two groups.

5.1. Context

The *context* of the memorial ceremony emerged as a significant theme from the data. This included participants’ reflections on the ceremony as a whole, as well as its positioning (and purpose) within the day visit. The majority of the participants felt positively about the inclusion, content and messages of the memorial ceremony in general. The students particularly felt it had been ‘very powerful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘interesting’ and ‘quite important’, and many of them commented on how appropriate they felt it had been within the context of the day. The educators generally agreed, tending to frame many of their responses vicariously, referencing their perceptions of the students’ experiences (for example—‘the participants find it impactful and all seem [to] be enthusiastic that it is included’). The students particularly appreciated its placement at the end of the day; they felt it was ‘appropriate’ here, given where they were and what they had experienced and learned about during their visit. Educators also felt it was ‘a fitting end to the day’ and ‘an effective ending’ to their brief time in Poland, that enabled students to ‘reflect privately on what they had seen and to “feel” the experience more’ and that this time might help them process what could potentially have been ‘a very challenging and emotional day’ for them. They thought the memorial ceremony brought ‘a sort of closure to the day’ for the students, with one particularly noting how they felt the ceremony was ‘a way of leaving Auschwitz-Birkenau behind which would not be possible if we simply walked out of the gate’. These comments echo Critchell’s call for ‘the necessity of some kind of “end” to the experience of visiting Auschwitz which allows individuals time for reflection’ (Critchell 2014, p. 236). Beyond providing a natural conclusion, other educators variously felt the ceremony offered students the time ‘to pay their respects and reflect’ in some way. This perceived desire for reflection was borne out by a consensus among the students that the ceremony had allowed them space to gather their thoughts and reflect on their experiences. One student said the ceremony provided ‘in its context, a beautiful and symbolic offering of our remembrance’, while another said that it had been the ‘perfect way to end the day as it was an opportunity to reflect on what we had learnt’. The reflective space of the ceremony had enabled several of them to start processing their learning in this way, particularly because the placement of the commemorative act within the geographical space of the museum

‘helps to even more take away the idea of it being a museum, it being just educational . . . it helped to really make me think about it, just to stand there and be with lots of people who are all in the same boat as me, who are there not knowing what to think, and feeling like they knew everything, yet they didn’t’.

Such reactions suggest something more is going on here than just *reflection* or achieving some sort of *closure* on the day. This opportunity to try to reflect and make sense of their learning meant they could show their ‘respect for everything’, or ‘pay their respects’—and it is this notion of *respect* that is perhaps most significant. As Tollerton observed, it is at the memorial ceremony ‘that LfA’s early associations with MOTL [March of the Living] are most apparent’ (Tollerton 2020, p. 166). There appeared to be a strong sense that some of the students needed to (or felt obliged to) show respect in ways that we might most readily associate with a pilgrimage to a gravesite. For other students, this time of reflection caused them to want ‘to say sorry almost’. This is also a significant reaction since this ‘guilt’ is adoptive, and students will need to be supported in how they process such feelings.

While there was a general feeling amongst the students that the context of the ceremony had been positive—and for a minority it had been ‘the most memorable part of the day’—there were several who were slightly more critical of it. Often this was connected with the length of the ceremony which, although relatively short (around 30 min), comes at the end of a very long day (this concern was also echoed by a few of the educators on their behalf). One student felt that a shorter ceremony would be ‘more hard hitting to people’, while another used similar language to consider how the ceremony ‘didn’t really hit me as much as seeing [the museum]’ had done. Those that did criticize the ceremony often did so apologetically (‘I did find it a bit long though, is that being horrible?’), or explained that they felt the fault was at least partly theirs—due to them being too cold or hungry to engage properly, for example. One student felt they were unable to process the ceremony at the end of the day because they were ‘very emotional . . . my brain was filled with questions so it was a bit overwhelming’, adding that they ‘needed more time to reflect before paying my respects’ (echoing the earlier comments that ‘paying respects’ would have been an appropriate response at the time, had they felt the clarity to be able to do so). Some educators agreed that tiredness and the weather often inhibited students’ capacity for engagement with the ceremony. One reminded themselves that while ‘we know what to expect when we get to this point—students do not’, suggesting that educators were better prepared for a prolonged ceremony in the outdoors than the students might be. However, educators generally felt students’ engagement was ‘remarkable, especially after such a long day’.

5.2. Content

The memorial ceremonies’ *content* emerged as a second significant theme within the data. Participants reflected in this theme on both the *explicit content* (readings, candle lighting, etc.) as well as the *implicit content* (how included they felt, and any messages or biases they inferred from the explicit content).

The explicit content begins with a series of readings at the opening of the ceremony. The students did not comment much on these, however, although a few said in passing that they ‘quite liked’ them. One remembered feeling the poems particularly connecting (on an implicit level), because ‘it made me think of each individual, and the experiences that I got a glimpse of whilst visiting’. The educators similarly scarcely mentioned the readings. When they did, the comments were positive, although a few commented on the practical aspects—such as readers sometimes being inaudible in the elements of an outdoor ceremony and suggesting that they might use microphones to help them be heard in future.

Students commented much more on the implicit content, particularly on their perceptions of the inclusivity of the ceremony they attended (in light of the diversity they perceived within the group as a whole). They felt the ceremony created ‘a really secure environment and atmosphere’ in which ‘you didn’t need to be Jewish to share in the message’. Some students felt the ceremony unified them because they were able to reflect on what

they had experienced—as one said, ‘you’re all coming together . . . people nodding and agreeing . . . and now we can process it together . . . it is helpful to be a group’. In discussing these feelings, many students mentioned the presence of the rabbi and the section of the ceremony he led, which they felt ‘tied together the events of the day’. They described the rabbi’s words as variously ‘moving’, ‘touching’ and ‘inspiring’, with one being particularly struck by how ‘the echoes of the rabbi’s voice . . . seemed a haunting evocation of life at a place that has . . . purged such expression’. This juxtaposition of life and death was noticed by others who agreed that the presence of the rabbi enabled them to focus on a celebration of the victims’ lives, rather than being solely fixed on their deaths (which had been the focus of much of the day so far). Several students mentioned the testimony given by one particular rabbi (whose grandfather had been murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau). The personal nature of this testimony struck a chord with students, who felt it highlighted the proximity of the events of the Holocaust, both historically and personally (thus linking the explicit content with the implicit). Indeed, there was a consensus that the rabbi’s main aim had been to re-humanize the victims, which the students evidently felt had been successful. Consequently, this rabbi’s testimony evoked a variety of reactions amongst the students, with one left feeling ‘proud’ (although they did not specify what of), while another found the rabbi’s words ‘surreal’. Similar emotions were evoked during the small section of the ceremony that the rabbis deliver in Hebrew. Far from feeling excluded by the unfamiliarity of the language, several students said they felt both moved and inspired by it. As one reflected, ‘there was something very calm and peaceful about hearing him sing in Hebrew and hearing it echo around the desolate camp . . . there was an element of feeling connected to each person through this song’. One of the educators agreed with this, saying they found the rabbi’s singing ‘deeply moving’ and mentioned that they had subsequently played a recording of this at their school on Holocaust Memorial Day. Another student was drawn to consider how this was the same language the prisoners might have sung and said the prayer in.

The students’ reactions to the inputs of the rabbis and the ceremony as a whole were overwhelmingly positive. Broadly these align with the earlier findings of [Chapman et al. \(2010\)](#), but are in contrast with many of [Critchell’s \(2014\)](#) findings. While the former authors found participants ‘particularly highly valued . . . the closing ceremony by Rabbi Marcus’ (p. 60), the latter study had more mixed findings (such as confusion amongst participants about ‘the universality of the contemporary lessons’ presented (p. 243)). The ceremony is a complex ‘interplay of secular performance, religious liturgy, and ritual innovation’ ([Tollerton 2020](#), p. 166) in unfamiliar (and potentially disorientating) surroundings. As such, different students are likely to respond to the ceremony in different ways, influenced by numerous factors relating to their visit, but also to their lives beyond (such as their own experiences or engagement with organized religion, for example), which are outside the HET’s control. Following Rabbi Marcus’ semi-retirement from the project, there are now several different rabbis accompanying LfA visits, offering a range of perspectives—how students react to them cannot be foreseen, but what is clear from this study is that the rabbis have the power to create a safe, inclusive atmosphere that enables the young people to connect with them as individuals and to continue to process their learning.

Only one student seemed confused by this element of the ceremony, because the use of Hebrew for them ‘kind of connects the British to the Jewish people’ (implying that they felt they were otherwise *unconnected* identities). There was also a strong sense amongst the students that the rabbi’s explicit words left the students with an implicit ‘message’—specifically that students should be alert to repetitions of racism and prejudice (particularly antisemitism), although this element divided the educators more, with some criticism about the content and message at times. Some of the educators felt that the rabbis could sometimes be overly political, or exclusive in their language (making assumptions about students’ family circumstances, for example). In this respect some felt conflicted between acknowledging the powerful, positive impact the ceremony often apparently had on students, with their own feelings about the timing or content of the ceremony.

There was acknowledgment that ‘recent changes [to the focus of the ceremony were] to be welcomed’, however, and some acceptance that possibly educators over-analyzed the content of the ceremony, with one conceding that how you might feel about the rabbi’s input was largely dependent upon ‘one’s subjective opinion’. Any ambivalent feelings expressed by the educators were perhaps best summed up by one who concluded that on reflection ‘it [the ceremony] can be a mixed bag’ dependent on many variables, such as the weather, the speakers, current affairs, etc.—many of which are outside the control of the HET team at the time.

Finally, some student responses reflected on how the rabbi’s words had caused them to consider implicit notions such as ‘the moral and ethical issues that the subject of the Holocaust brings about’. For example, the rabbi had made some of them think about the wider perpetrator narrative; particularly about the problematic moral position of the drivers of the cattle wagon trains transporting victims to the camp. A few students reported feeling confused by some of the rabbi’s words, not understanding (or disagreeing) with certain comments made (for example, one felt more optimistic about the presence of evil in the world today than they felt the rabbi had been), although these only amounted to a very small number of student responses.

At the end of each ceremony, students are given a candle and invited to light it and place it somewhere within the museum grounds as an explicit act of commemoration (coming as it does at the close of the semi-religious ceremony). Tollerton has argued that this simple act of placing a candle might be ‘potentially awkward’ for students’ as it overtly ‘blurs’ the line between historical knowledge and religious performance, possibly leaving them feeling ‘that they have had a potentially transformative encounter with the past’ (Tollerton 2020, p. 168). However, the students in this study didn’t appear to interpret the act in this way. Rather, the candle appeared to be a conduit to helping them better express their desire to memorialize and remember those that had been murdered. It also provided a unifying act. Usually the candles are left around the end of the railway line at Birkenau (if the ceremony has taken place outside), however if the weather is poor then they might place their candles under the guardhouse archway or take them away to light at home. Students spoke overwhelmingly positively about this element of the ceremony, recalling it as being a ‘privilege’, ‘special’, ‘lovely’ and ‘memorable’—and all felt it had been ‘the right way to end the day’. The students considered the candles to be ‘a respectful gesture’ and ‘a lovely way to remember the victims’. Educators entirely agreed with these sentiments, although the location of the lighting was significant to some of them (feeling it was ‘more moving and atmospheric when done near the railway track,’ than elsewhere). Some of the language the students used when talking about the candle lighting echoed the unity they had mentioned earlier; standing together to do it had been a harmonious act both as a group, and in showing their respect for the victims. For some this message was evidently future facing, as the lighting of the candles represented ‘a message of hope not only to remember those who have died but also to offer light and hope to those who still to this day are oppressed by darkness’. One student specifically mentioned the cultural relevance of candle lighting, remarking that they felt it was ‘one of the most accessible and universal ways of showing our respect as a group, especially as a British group’ (although they did acknowledge this might also be the case for some other cultures)—thus linking the explicit act with the implicit intention.

5.3. Emotional Engagement

The final theme to emerge concerned students’ and educators’ *emotional engagement* with the ceremonies—which included their engagement on a religious or spiritual level (where relevant). Although such comments were made far more by the students than the educators, they emerged from the data as a distinct set of remarks reflecting how the ceremony had impacted them personally (or to use the participants’ own language—how it had ‘hit’ them personally). When educators mentioned this type of impact, they tended to do so in reference again to the students; as one said, ‘I think the students are usually very touched

by it [the ceremony]', while another recalled how 'students and staff [the accompanying teachers] are always moved by this event'. For the students, the impact was more direct, and they employed more emotive language accordingly—they remembered the ceremony as being 'moving', 'poignant', 'touching', and 'emotionally challenging'. It was evident that for some students it had acted as a conduit to release emotions that had perhaps been building up throughout the day. One said that after a long day the ceremony 'was one of the most powerful moments and the only thing that made me cry . . . and also gave a time to reflect and think about the events of the day which I found important'. Hearing the poems and testimony made several students reflect on the loss of so many victims and their culture. A couple of the students found it a challenge to reconcile what they were now feeling with their surroundings (linking to the first theme, above). One remembered asking themselves at the time 'how is it sunny?' reflecting now that 'I feel like it shouldn't be nice there, you know what I mean?' This student was used to seeing Auschwitz-Birkenau in 'black and white' from photographs—so visiting on a sunny day in early summer left them feeling disorientated because 'you expect it to be miserable [and that incongruity] just messes with you'. Conversely, another student felt quite removed from the physical place, claiming they 'almost forgot where we were in a sense' as the testimonies and stories they heard made it actually 'the lightest point of the day'. For this student, the stories instilled in them an obligation 'to be a mouthpiece' for the victims (again, a future facing reaction from a student). This was echoed by another who felt that the ceremony had helped them better understand the victims as individuals, and that they should never forget them or 'those who still to this day are oppressed by darkness'. Since their visit, this student had decided to light a candle again on Holocaust Memorial Day 'as it reminds me of when I did it on the trip'. Another student spoke about the long term emotional impact their engagement with the ceremony and the LfA project generally had on them (they had completed their LfA project a year earlier, but had volunteered to be interviewed while I was in their school speaking to students who had accompanied a visit the previous day). They opened up about how their participation had caused them to reflect on current affairs and view the world differently as a result:

'I think I became quite a bit more of a dark person afterwards . . . I wasn't as wishy-washy as I was before . . . it helped to really make me understand the potential horrors that could occur in the future . . . when I see what's going on with even something like Brexit, it [Brexit] really stresses me out . . . this idea of discrimination . . . really upsets me. Whenever I wake up, I always make sure I check the news to see has it got worse, and it is getting worse . . . '

It was obviously quite hard for this student to speak about this. He didn't blame the LfA project in any way for making him feel 'dark'; he was reflecting from a point of distance on one event (amongst others) that had significantly influenced the evolving way in which he was coming to view the world and current events now as a young adult.

All of these emotional responses further illustrate LfA as 'something of a hybrid entity [because] its very structure evokes ideas of [an] emotionally transformative physical encounter' (Tollerton 2020, p. 165). If 'hearing is not like seeing' then we can reasonably expect the students to have an emotional reaction to the site. Emotional engagement with the text of the Holocaust can be complex, transformative, or (at worst) self-defeating (for discussions on this see variously Baum 1996; Richardson 2012; Critchell 2014). The students in this study were encountering visceral emotional reactions both in the short and longer term. The impact of this emotional engagement should not be underestimated and could be long lasting, as evidenced particularly clearly in the last students' response. While Critchell (2014, p. 254) is highly critical of what she saw as 'the emotive framing' of LfA projects, Tollerton more recent argued that 'it would be unfair to suggest that HET do not make efforts to go beyond emotional encounter' (Tollerton 2020, p. 163). At the orientation seminar HET educators endeavor to ensure students understand there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way for them to visit the museum, and the responses here serve to further illustrate the diversity of possible emotional reactions students might have.

For a small number of students, for example, there was a feeling that they had engaged with the ceremony on a more religious or spiritual level. One described themselves as a Christian and thought that consequently the ceremony had been ‘lovely to be able to reflect on my day in a religious way’. For another, it had been a good opportunity to understand more about Judaism through the prayers and songs they heard. One student who described themselves as ‘not really religious’ still felt ‘connected . . . via prayer’; as they put it, ‘even if you don’t have connections to any of the victims, it’s nice to pray for someone else’s family and hope that they found peace’. For each of these students, the opportunity to make religious or spiritual connections further helped them make sense of their experiences, without feeling externally impelled to ‘pray’ in any specific or particular way. Only one student found it all too much, feeling too ‘overwhelmed . . . after everything’ they had seen and heard during the day to really feel as though they had engaged with the ceremony in a way they had expected to.

As was evident in the previous theme, the educators said far less about these elements of the ceremony. Again, this was perhaps because they had experienced the ceremonies more often and had become somewhat inured to its emotional impact. However, one paused to reflect on their perception of the necessity for such acts to conclude what is an intense and information-heavy day for the students:

‘it is a vitally important part of the experience. Much of what we do when we guide is to engage the participants with the site in an academic way. This is important of course but sometimes I think the students would like the chance to reflect privately on what they are seeing and “feel” the experience more. The ceremony at the end is one way to achieve this’.

6. Discussion

The data presented in this study has revealed a complex picture at a pivotal point in the students’ and educators’ LfA journey. It has gone some way to revealing the interplay that exists in this moment, and in this place, where learning and memorialization intersect. It is important to remember that such encounters are common at the museum, where most visitors navigate the space as a tourist of sorts (directed by a museum guide following an organized itinerary), but within an acknowledged ‘sacred space’ (Young 1993, p. 142). Even if visitors do not intend to engage with an act of memorialization themselves, they will encounter such acts throughout their visit (such as the candles and wreaths always present at the Execution Wall at Auschwitz I). Thus, in many ways the LfA ceremony is just one of many commonplace acts of commemoration or memorialization that visitors engage with at the site—and as such it could be considered unremarkable. However, this ceremony takes place at a certain point in a meticulously planned educational programme, and as such this warrants further consideration.

The LfA ceremony comes at the close of the second part of the project. At the first part (the orientation seminar) the educators will have led the students through workshops on pre-war Jewish life, definitions of the Holocaust, and expectations of their visit, as well as hearing from a survivor speaker (Richardson 2021)—all of which is intended to prepare the students for their visit to Poland. During the visit they will have visited a site of pre-war Jewish life (in Oświęcim), before their guided tour of the museum. All of this sensitively introduces them to the *lived* experience of Jews before the Holocaust, in the hope that they can then better understand what was lost. The emphasis on pre-war Jewish life is based on sound pedagogical principles (see for example, Lindquist 2006; IHRA 2019), enabling young learners to focus on *individual* stories (such as the survivor they have heard at the orientation seminar, and the Jewish community in Oświęcim). This focus on the specific is intended to inoculate them against “the problem of the numbers,” the incomprehensibility that comes from being asked to understand an event whole scale’ (Lindquist 2006, p. 216), and educators read from individual testimonies throughout the visit to the museum to underline this. As such, the memorial ceremony comes at the end of a long day and at a point where the students have engaged with a programme that

overtly navigates an acknowledged tension between the whole (the 6 million) and the particular (the individual). While the evidence presented in this study suggests some disagreement about the content and positioning of the ceremony, the overwhelming sense was that it provided an opportunity for the students (in particular) to pause and reflect on their learning so far. Such opportunities for reflective spaces are often neglected by teachers (Richardson 2012), leaving young learners in a state of emotional and cognitive dissonance. Such opportunities appear to be beneficial for students to reflect, and to begin the next stage of their ongoing understanding of the complexity of the Holocaust (which in this particular programme will be further supported by their educators at their follow up seminar around a week after the visit to Poland).

Learning about a topic such as the Holocaust can be ‘both a destructive and creative process’ (Clements 2006, p. 46). If teachers are to support their pupils in finding the ‘creative’ learning amidst the potentially ‘destructive’ subject knowledge, they need to provide them with spaces in which they can pause, reflect, question and begin to further ‘create’ their understanding, and be supported emotionally in this (Richardson 2012). During a LfA project, this space is provided mainly during the ceremony (although significant time is also given at the follow up seminar, as well as more informally throughout the other parts of the project), and this is in a format that is familiar to the students (an act of collective worship). What this study has revealed, is that those of us who are involved in Holocaust education in other contexts need also to consider not only *whether* we provide such reflective spaces, but also the form and context of such spaces. From the evidence presented in this paper, I suggest that this might be achieved through consideration of the following issues:

- The provision of reflective spaces—when students encounter emotionally demanding content such as the Holocaust, educators should provide them with formal and informal spaces that enable them to pause, reflect, and begin to find the potential for ongoing ‘creative’ learning from their encounter with the text.
- Providing a clear structure for reflective spaces—such creative learning may not happen instinctively. When these spaces are facilitated, educators should provide a clear structure for their students so that they understand the ‘purpose’ of the space—to reflect on their learning so far, and/or towards their future thinking and actions. It is important that students are not left to ‘flounder’ with this new, potentially ‘destructive’ knowledge (Clements 2006, p. 46). Structured reflective spaces should support students in beginning a process of *emotional organization* as a means of moving forwards with this new knowledge within their developing world view as a young adult.

Additionally, if the reflective space takes a religious or semi-religious form (as in this study), the following should also be considered:

- The reflective space should be familiar to some extent. In this study the students were accustomed to acts of collective worship, and this ceremony broadly follows that format, enabling familiarity. It might be challenging for students to reflect in unfamiliar surroundings (thus potentially compounding any disconnection with the subject matter and hindering creative learning).
- Similarly, the content of the reflective space should be carefully considered—in this study some of the content was unfamiliar to most for the students (such as the inclusion of Hebrew prayers). While the data suggest that this unfamiliar content appeared to enhance most students’ connection with the reflective space, there is the potential for the opposite to occur.
- Finally, it is particularly important in religious or semi-religious contexts to ensure that participation is optional (as is the case at LfA ceremonies), to avoid students rejecting what they might perceive as an imposed (religious) framework for their learning.

In its exploration of a complex network of recollected experiences, this study has begun to offer some understanding of the role commemorative or memorial acts can play in educational visits to authentic sites such as this. Well-intentioned moments of collective worship are likely to be multifaceted encounters for students, and teachers need to consider

carefully the purpose and intent of such acts before they plan them into educational visits. Considering them as *reflective spaces* might go some way to avoiding students being engaged merely with superficial acts of commemorative pageantry. The text of the Holocaust can be powerful in its transformative potential—the potential for young people to develop their historical knowledge, as well as their empathetic understanding of their sense of place as young citizens in a world where genocide is possible. But such transformations cannot be left to happen spontaneously. Reflective spaces enable educators to appropriately facilitate, support, and structure that transformative learning. They allow students to reflect on their learning experiences, before providing space to question, challenge, and ultimately synthesize different strands of the complex narrative they have encountered, in a safe educational space. In this way, reflective spaces can become meaningful, enabling them to continue a creative journey of learning and understanding in this challenging subject.

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