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Learning and Teaching about Holocaust: Teacher Education Students' Perspective in Serbia²

Extended summary

Holocaust, defined as the process of suffering of 6 million Jews, organized by the Nazi Germany during the World War II, is a topic that not only does not lose its relevance, but it has gained more attention in scientific fields dealing with education in the past few decades. Many questions are still open for discussion, primarily in terms of adequacy in approaching this topic, interdisciplinary cooperation, selection of teaching content that should be included in teaching, even the very perception of Holocaust which is not always precise and uniform. Teaching about the Holocaust should be aimed at students' understanding of historical facts, and it is also necessary to point out the importance that this part of the past has for the modern world and current social problems.

The paper presents the results of an empirical research aimed at analyzing the challenges in the process of learning and teaching about the Holocaust in formal and informal education. Using a close-ended questionnaire, the perspective of the students of teacher education faculties in Serbia was investigated, and the sample included 741 respondents from the Faculty of Education (31.04%), Teacher Education Faculty (29.96%), Faculty of Philosophy (38.6%) and Faculty of Philology (0.4%). The sampling was carried out using the convenience method. In terms of gender structure, there were 85.96% female and 14.04% male respondents, given the fact that female students are predominant at teacher education faculties. The average age of the respondents was 21.7 years. Apart from socio-demographic characteristics, the questionnaire

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included questions related to respondents' previous experience with learning about Holocaust, both in formal and informal education, as well as the questions investigating the respondents' attitudes towards teaching about Holocaust. The answers in this segment of the questionnaire were either binary (yes/no) or according to the model of dominant answer in the form of a four-level Likert scale. The obtained data were analyzed using a descriptive method.

The results indicate a varied understanding of the term Holocaust, with the prevailing understanding that the process included a wide range of victims, Jews, Roma, disabled persons, homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses, and the members of different political groups. Implications for improving teaching practice refer mainly to the need for a more precise terminology, in terms of pointing to distinctive characteristics of Holocaust compared to other examples of genocide in history which, undoubtedly, should be included in the curriculum. Students find this topic emotionally taxing and very disturbing, and they identify this as one of the biggest obstacles encountered in teaching about the Holocaust.

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As the biggest obstacles to teaching about Holocaust students report that it is a topic which is very disturbing (59.25%) or emotionally taxing (62.75%), as well as in an intellectual sense (49.39%). Accordingly, the recommendations for school practice include improving teachers' competencies in order to expand their knowledge and develop skills to deal with this demanding topic in the best possible way. In students' opinion, teaching content on this topic should be predominantly included in the school subject History, but also to some extent in other school subjects such as civic education, literature, sociology, art, and music.

The obtained results can serve as a platform for creating implications for educational policies with the aim of deepening and expanding knowledge on this topic, but also with the aim of developing intercultural competences, reflective dealing with stereotypes and prejudices, and fostering a culture of remembrance. The content related to the history and culture of Jewish community in Europe before the war should also be included in teaching for building a more coherent and comprehensive approach to this topic. In addition, the specificities of the long process of anti-Semitism should also be addressed in the classroom.

Keywords: Holocaust, learning, teaching, students

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