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COPING WITH HOLOCAUST MORAL DILEMMAS THROUGH A HOLOCAUST LEARNING PROGRAM

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Abstract

This paper describes the emotional experiences of Israeli high-school students when faced with Holocaust moral dilemmas following their participation in a Holocaust learning program in high school. Thirteen participants boys and girls, aged from 17-18 volunteered to take part in this research. These teenagers are members of the third generation after the Holocaust. The research was conducted when the students were in the middle of Grade 12 after completing their matriculation exams in Holocaust studies. During individual in-depth interviews, interviewees were asked about the learning experiences they underwent concerning their views towards moral dilemmas faced by Jews during and after the Holocaust. The results revealed that the students' moral attitudes seem to have been created through learning in the course, as they were able to develop deeper understanding of human feelings and actions in the reality of the Holocaust. In addition, they managed to understand the complexity of the interaction between emotions and moral thinking as an outcome of their learning. It was concluded that the participant's knowledge and emotional involvement with the issue of Holocaust was strengthened by their exposure to Holocaust moral dilemmas. In addition, learning about specific and realistic human experiences such as those depicted in Holocaust moral dilemmas helped participants to develop a wider moral perspective and understanding of human behavior. It encouraged the development of universal moral thinking and deepened self-understanding and awareness of moral issues in general.

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1. Introduction

The Jewish Holocaust occurred during the Second World War (1939-1945). The Holocaust involved the despicable systematic murder of six million Jews by the German Nazis in Europe (Barley, 2007). The Holocaust is a national trauma for the Jewish people and for Israel, the Jewish state. It is predicted that it will continue to influence and occupy Israelis and Jews for many generations to come (Greif et al., 1983). The following words clarify the impact of the Holocaust on Israeli society:

There can be no doubt that the Holocaust shaped and still continues to shape our collective memory and has become part of our national identity and we therefore have an obligation to teach children about the Holocaust in the education system. We should continuously deal with questions about the messages of the Holocaust. (Kolett, 2014, p. 16)

From 1948 when the State of Israel was established, the Holocaust was conceived as a fundamental event that defined the nature of Israeli society at different levels. One of the domains that was significantly influenced by the Holocaust was the Israeli education system, which altered its approach to the Holocaust over time (Machman, 1998). The following reflects the influence of the Holocaust on Israeli education:

The Holocaust can remind us that Israel is also the means to protect against any future attempt to obliterate the Jewish people in its entirety. The Holocaust can teach us that there are sane people who developed cultures who are liable to be enlisted to perform genocide and that allowing them to slaughter those distant from them will eventually lead them to slaughter their own relatives. The Holocaust can teach us that the strength of resistance exists in the soul of the normal person, a power that they themselves could not imagine. We must learn not only in order that they should know, we should learn despite the pain. That pain is less large than the suffering that may be the fate of the Jewish people and humanity if we forget. (Barnea, 2014, p. 27)

Research investigating the effect of the Holocaust learning program was conducted with Israeli high school students and focused mainly on the influence of the journey to Holocaust sites in Poland, especially the national-educational contribution of the journey (Cohen, 2010; Davidovich et al., 2014; Feldman, 2001; Fisherman & Kaniel, 2004; Mimouni-Bloch et al., 2012). Other studies investigated visitors' various emotional reactions towards Holocaust victims, Poles and even Arabs following these journeys (Berger, 2012; Kimchi, 2011; Mimouni-Bloch et al., 2012).

In December, 2014, as a result of the appointment of a new Minister of Education, Shai Peron, the Ministry of Education published a revised learning program on the subject of the Holocaust, known as "In the paths of memory" (Ministry of Education, 2015). This is an organized set learning program from nursery to Grade 12 that came into operation from the school year 2014-2015. This is the first time that the Ministry of Education determined a learning program that obliges the teaching of Holocaust heritage for the entire education system and all age groups under its jurisdiction. The program was influenced by the ministry's perception that students should be guided to "significant learning", which is actually another definition for "experiential learning" (Ministry of Education, 2014). The purposes of the program were defined as follows:

General goals: (a) familiarity with the events of the Holocaust; (b) familiarity with the lost (pre-Holocaust) Jewish world; (c) creating empathy towards Holocaust victims; (d) highlighting

revelations of human spirit during the Holocaust and their expression in areas of creativity, culture, philosophy and the arts; (e) empowering a sense of self-efficacy through cognitive and emotional tools to cope with the story of the Holocaust.

Goals relating to values: (a) reinforcement of Jewish values and international humanistic values; (b) reinforcement of democratic values and tolerance and fostering the aspiration to found an exemplary society; (c) fostering human sensitivity; (d) commitment to the continued existence of the Jewish people; (e) commitment to the fight against racism; (e) commitment to the existence of a Jewish and democratic state. (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 3).

The motto for the program is “a better future for humanity is embodied not in a particular social regime but in a better human” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p.1). This is a quotation from the work of the famous Jewish author and educator, who was murdered during the Holocaust, Dr. Janusz Korczak.

The program includes four main subjects that are delivered in a manner appropriate for each age group: (a) The Jewish world in all its hues and communities before the Holocaust (b) The human story during the Holocaust including: Jews coping with the Holocaust period, Righteous Gentiles among the Nations (non-Jewish people who risked their lives and often their families’ lives in order to save Jews during the Holocaust), and those who stood by the side and the Nazis and those who assisted them; (c) Liberation and the return to life (d) Fundamental concepts of the Holocaust.

The main alterations in this program in contrast to the past programs are: (a) An official instruction was given to teach the subject of the Holocaust from the nursery through all age groups (b) Personal research projects performed by Grade 12 students on the subject of the Holocaust replaced the former matriculation exam. This research constitutes 30% of the general grade for the matriculation exam in the discipline of history (In the paths of memory, Ministry of Education, 2015).

The program aroused public criticism from two aspects: (1) the claim that it is too early to start to teach the subject of the Holocaust in nursery. (2) Replacing the matriculation exam with personal research work which bears a grade. It is argued that due to this change the teachers will teach less on the subject of the Holocaust and the students despite their deeper work on the specific subject that they research, will in total receive only a restricted and partial picture of the subject of the Holocaust. Since the program only began to operate in the school year 2014-2015, it is still in its infancy and there has been no study of the influence of these changes (In the paths of memory, Ministry of Education, 2015).

The main aim of this study was to analyze and understand the participants’ narratives regarding their personal experiences of Holocaust Learning Program. Beyond numbers and facts, it is very important to understand the participant’s world, the way they felt and their thinking during this learning process. These narratives can offer new insights to the discussion on the educational relevance and power of the Holocaust Learning Program as it affects the development of moral attitudes concerning the Holocaust, and moral lessons that can be derived from the program. Examination of the participants’ narratives will hopefully give us deeper understanding of the cognitive and emotional meanings attributed by the participants to different parts of their learning.

2. Problem Statement

Previous research on moral dilemmas has not investigated the Holocaust Learning Program participants' narratives and the emotional meanings that they attribute to their personal learning experiences.

3. Research Questions

What were the participant's experiences over their participation in Holocaust learning program? What did participants learn from these experiences? Which moral meanings did participants derive from their Holocaust learning?

4. Purpose of the Study

To understand how moral attitudes are constructed, from an analysis of the participants' narratives regarding their personal experiences of the Holocaust Learning Program.

5. Research Methods

Participants. Thirteen Israeli high school students aged from 17-18 volunteered to take part in this research. Four boys: Boaz, Elad, Asaf and Ronen, and nine girls: Yonit, Pazit, Noa, Lily, Rachel, Miriam, Sarah, Aia and Dina {all names are fictive}. These teenagers are members of the third generation after the Holocaust.

Procedure. The research was conducted when the students were in the middle of Grade 12 after having completed one academic year of Holocaust learning. During this period, they answered the Moral Attitudes Questionnaire which contained statements describing seven Holocaust moral dilemmas and seven post-Holocaust moral dilemmas. The questionnaire was administered at three points in time. During individual in-depth interviews, interviewees were asked questions about their learning experiences and their effect on their views towards the moral dilemmas faced by Jews during and after the Holocaust, the moral lessons they learned and their experience of participation in Holocaust learning.

The research tool used in this study was individual in-depth interviews. This is a very good and appropriate tool for the study of people's emotions and the meanings they attribute to their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morgan, 1988; Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2002).

Data analysis, the individual in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and organized according to themes and sub-themes using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen in order to reinforce the validity of the data and provide rich and deep information (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibton, 2002; Kassin & Kromer-Nevo, 2010; Shkedi, 2003).

6. Findings

Thematic analysis of the results revealed 4 main themes:

6.1. Learning about Holocaust moral dilemmas as a new experience:

During the interviews it became increasingly clear that the interviewees lacked much knowledge concerning Holocaust moral dilemmas. There were slight differences from dilemma to dilemma but overall, the picture was alike. The reason for this is that little attention was given to this issue in the Holocaust Learning Program. Examples of the above results can be found in the following explanations given by the interviewees:

"I don't really understand the dilemma about the comparison of the Holocaust, I know very little about other genocides; I know a little about the "Jewish expulsion from Spain" [not actually genocide]; I heard about the 'Armenian Holocaust' but I really don't know anything much about it" (Dina).

"We learnt a bit about those subjects [the dilemmas] and that influenced my attitudes, although we didn't go deeply into them. I didn't understand when exactly the 'revengers dilemma' occurred ... now after you explained it [in the interview], my attitude towards it is clearer." (Sara).

After hearing these narratives, it can be assumed that deeper learning and a broader understanding of the dilemmas would have probably altered the attitudes of at least some of the students for at least some of the dilemmas.

6.2. The creation of moral attitudes through learning:

Learning about Holocaust moral dilemmas gave the interviewees the opportunity to meet this complex issue for the first time. This encounter enabled them to define their moral attitudes towards the dilemmas as a new experience. We shall now present examples:

Ronen and Noa explained how their moral attitudes had developed through learning:

"Learning about moral dilemmas influenced me, since it made me think about the dilemmas posed in the questionnaire although we had not learned about a large proportion of them; as a result of the questionnaires I thought about my attitudes" (Ronen).

"Meeting with Holocaust moral dilemmas really helped because suddenly I paid attention to the dilemmas themselves and really examined myself; before I had not thought about these things at all" (Noa).

Elad and Pazit talked about the connection they found between Holocaust moral dilemmas and actual morality:

"Many students in our school are now aware of a lot of important things that they had not been aware of; before Holocaust moral learning I hadn't thought about moral questions at all... When I began to think about the moral dilemmas it really influenced me and made me think about those situations; it opened up all sorts of new facets of knowledge and thinking so it had a strong influence on me and probably on many of my friends too; Moral thinking can help us in everyday situations and maybe later when we become soldiers" (Elad).

"our thinking helped our development and I think that my attitudes and opinions developed. it helped us to think about it more and in greater depth and then to connect it to the present because today there are

also horrors that are happening now such as the horrors perpetrated by 'ISIS' [the 'Islamic State'] ... the moral issues really touched me personally and helped me to think what I would do in those situations ... perhaps it will also influence me in my life because I will think more about morality and the decisions that I make" (Pazit).

Aia provided another viewpoint. She emphasized the deeper understanding of human feelings and the complexity of the connection between emotions and moral decisions:

"The dilemmas provide another facet of the Holocaust. We always learn about technical matters, what is a 'ghetto', what is the 'Judenratt' etc. The dilemmas speak about people, how they felt and how they acted. It's more personal and emotional; it puts you into the situation so that you need to think how you would have acted. The dilemmas touch upon emotions and it is very important to learn about them" (Aia).

It can be concluded that the students' new exposure to the issue of moral dilemmas, created awareness, motivated moral thinking and helped to create and shape moral attitudes.

6.3. The evolution of moral attitudes through learning:

Interviewees expressed two main factors that caused them to change their attitudes through learning:

The first factor was the maturation process they underwent during learning. This process led them to be more aware of the complexity of the dilemmas and to be less naive. Miriam and Noa explained:

"Now it is more difficult for me to decide ... in all the dilemmas I wanted to write 'uncertain'... I have matured and I value my life more and that of other people and this makes it more difficult for me to determine my attitudes" (Miriam).

"At the beginning, I thought that I needed to be terribly moral ... I would do nice things and write that I was against anything that would harm others ... now I understand that I simply have to live... I think that at first I looked at things from our period in time and I understood less what the Jews really underwent, and now I understand things better" (Noa).

The second factor was the different learning processes that the students underwent as expressed by the interviewees:

"After we spoke more about the 'thief's dilemma' I understood that everyone stole from everyone else in order to survive... it's a momentary decision, it's not a moral consideration, you don't think about someone - who he is and what he is - you just want to live" (Asaf).

"Because of this extensive knowledge [at the end of the learning] I changed my opinion deciding that I would kill the baby (in the 'crying baby' dilemma) ... the situation now is clearer. I understand now that there is nowhere to escape ... to save the life of the majority if there is no alternative then we have to kill him in order to survive" (Yonit).

Rachel gave her own interpretation of this factor and mentioned how difficult it was to determine a moral decision:

"I really felt that I could not answer this question about the baby [in the 'crying baby' dilemma] ... it was just too hard... in the 'thief's dilemma' I truly tried to cope with it but I simply couldn't because both solutions are right... The more I learned the more I deliberate... for the 'Judenratt dilemma' I marked 'I have no opinion'... I felt that I didn't have enough knowledge to answer some of the dilemmas, so at different

times I chose to mark 'I have no opinion'; at the end of day I think that time gave me better perspective" (Rachel).

It can be concluded that changes in attitudes stemmed from acquisition of knowledge during learning, maturation processes and the passage of time that passed between the three timepoints at which the students filled out the questionnaires.

6.4. The importance of learning about Holocaust moral dilemmas:

The interviewees noted five main contributions that they derived from learning about Holocaust moral dilemmas.

The first was that they felt it deepened their knowledge on the Holocaust from a human viewpoint, so that they were able to understand the mental processes that the Jews experienced as expressed by the interviewees:

"It is very important to learn about the dilemmas because as a society it was difficult to accept the Holocaust survivors in Israel and learning about the moral dilemmas really helped us to understand what happened there and why people acted as they did. This aspect is very important because it is the history of our people, of all of us" (Boaz).

"The Holocaust is a very important part of our past and it is important to learn about it and not to forget it or to ignore it and simply to go on. It is important to know why people did things, what motivated them, what their considerations were and how they decided what to do"(Miriam).

"It is important to learn from the past for the future and to understand how to behave otherwise, both with regard to the behavior of the Jews and the behavior of the Nazis. It is important to learn about this in order to understand better what our people and my own family experienced. In this way, it is possible to understand their inner experiences" (Pazit).

The second contribution was the beginning of the development of universal moral thinking:

"In some way it is clear that such situations or similar will reflect upon people in future life, perhaps in a smaller and weaker manner, but they will arrive. If we learn about those dilemmas, we will perhaps not repeat the mistakes of the past" (Dina).

"Dealing with morality could improve my behavior in the future in similar situations. As a result of and thanks to the learning process that I have experienced this year it is a lot clearer and meaningful to me; it influences you to take things in proportion, to understand that things in our lives are actually quite small in comparison to the things as happened in the Holocaust. The research led me to really think and think in a different way. It encouraged me to deliberate more and develop my own moral attitudes" (Elad).

The third contribution was the understanding of the connection between moral behavior in extreme situations and moral behavior in regular daily life:

"I think that the Holocaust was an exceptional event that forced people to face situations that they would never otherwise have encountered ... when you think of their moral dilemmas it can teach you about human nature and what you would do when you are in a situation where you have to save yourself or die" (Aia).

"We must gain something from learning about the Holocaust... We must not dismiss it as just another chapter in history. It is important to learn about and draw conclusions from the dilemmas, both those of the Jews and those of the Nazis because they are expressed even in daily matters" (Asaf).

"Learning about the moral dilemmas can help to construct a morality that will prevent such deterioration at least among some of the society. If we deal with the dilemmas of the Holocaust without linking it to present-day reality or to future eventualities there will be no association made between these things. There should be a framework that will tie things together and this should be done by learning about the dilemmas" (Rachel).

In the Holocaust situations there were people who knew how to make the right decisions in those situations and there were those who did not. It also teaches us a lot about us as individuals. When you mark the solutions for these dilemmas on the questionnaire it teaches you about yourself, what type of human being you are" (Sara).

The fourth contribution was the deepening of self-understanding and self-awareness in relation to moral issues:

"Learning about the moral dilemmas helps us to understand things relating to morality and may help me in my moral decisions in the future; When you think about the Holocaust usually you think about the incinerators, the 'ghetto', the hunger and so on... you do not think about the person himself, and what he experienced, what the people faced and what they had to decide each day. When you encounter that, you begin to understand the mental difficulty that you might have with yourself if you ever need to cope with these kinds of situations" (Yonat).

"The entire Holocaust deals with moral dilemmas.... If we do not learn about these dilemmas, we will not understand the Holocaust well. This learning could also influence moral decisions that I have to make in the future in society and in my family" (Lily).

The fifth contribution was the strengthening of Holocaust memory by learning about the moral dilemmas:

"I am afraid that with time the Holocaust will not be part of our awareness any more that it will be forgotten. It is very important that it should not happen! The superficial way that Holocaust is being taught now may cause a boredom and a lack of interest among young students like ourselves; I think that dealing with and learning about the moral dilemmas will make things more interesting and alive for young students and actually for everyone; in this way, it will contribute to the memory of the Holocaust" (Noa).

It can be concluded that the interviewees strongly valued learning about the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust from these five different perspectives. Their estimation related both to the enrichment of their knowledge about human and historical aspects of the Holocaust and also to the linkage that they identified between this knowledge and their moral behavior in their present and future life. Another most important contribution is that the students were able to better understand why it is important to remember the Holocaust.

7. Conclusion

The experience of coping with Holocaust moral dilemmas through learning was a new experience for the participants in the research. The reason is that this issue is not included in Holocaust learning

programs. It was therefore important and relevant to study the results of this learning and to draw conclusions.

The interviewees found connections between Holocaust moral dilemmas and morality in general. This finding is supported by the finding of Mimouni-Bloch et al. (2012) that students who participated in Holocaust experiential learning had an evident sense of increased identification with the victims and also with general liberal values.

The creation of moral attitudes through learning seems to have occurred because participants in the program were able to develop deeper understanding of human feelings and the complexity of the interaction between emotions and moral decisions. This result correlates with the conclusions of recent studies supporting the assumption that when an individual is exposed to the experience of harming other people, it triggers strong natural emotional reactions, expressed at the cognitive and emotional levels which will influence his/her moral judgment and potentially his/her actions (Cushman et al., 2006; Greene et al., 2007).

Learning about Holocaust moral dilemmas was a new experience for the participants due to the lack of general knowledge and specific exposure to Holocaust moral dilemmas in school. Thus, the exposure to moral dilemmas stemmed mainly from the students' participation in the research. It is again noted that Holocaust moral dilemmas are not an integral part of the Holocaust studies curricula in Israel (In the paths of memory (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Learning about specific and realistic human experiences such as are depicted in the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust helped participants to develop a wider moral perspective and understanding of human behavior. It encouraged the development of universal moral thinking and deepened self-understanding and awareness of moral issues. These will potentially have an effect on their moral judgment and actions in the present as well as in the future.

The participant's knowledge and also their emotional involvement with regard to the issue of Holocaust was strengthened by their exposure to Holocaust moral dilemmas. Therefore "Holocaust moral dilemmas" is an important subject that should be included in future Holocaust Learning Program curricula.

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