

Romani Holocaust education: what is the actual influence on students' attitudes?

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Roma continue not only to be discriminated against and to experience racist-motivated violence. Past and present racist violence and trauma that Roma experience are largely devalued by societies in Europe today. Knowing that education plays a key role in the development of intergroup relations and the development of students' identities, the question emerges: what is the role of educational discourses on Roma in the development of social attitudes that devalue the violence and trauma experienced by Roma individuals and communities? In this essay, I pose this question and outline existing studies that could provide us with some answers as well as with avenues for further research.

Keywords: anti-gypsyism, anti-Roma racism, Holocaust education, human rights, Roma minority, Romani Holocaust, textbooks

It is undeniable that Romani communities have experienced grave traumatic events and violence by European perpetrators. The arrival of Roma to the European continent was met with enslavement and attempts at cultural genocide, among other acts of violence. The violence continued with the attempted genocide of the Romani population by Nazi Germany and their allies. Further group-based violence has included forced sterilization, assimilation measures, and economic exclusion leading to extreme poverty. The violence towards Roma is not a thing of the past. There has been a rise in right-wing vigilante groups committing violence towards Romani communities and even mass murders (Bjørge & Mareš, 2019). Further, in the past two decades Roma have experienced ethnic-based murders, demolitions of neighbourhoods, and many cases of mob violence (ERRC, 2019), not to mention the countless incidents of police violence and murder (ERRC, 2021).

The political and public response to the forementioned violence towards Roma indicates societies' devaluation of trauma experienced by Roma. Examples are the lack official recognition of Roma as victims of the Holocaust, absence of legal means for redress for crimes during the Holocaust, and justice systems failing to prosecute perpetrators of violence towards Roma individuals and communities.

The purpose of this essay is to pose the question: what is the role of educational discourses on Roma in the development of social attitudes that devalue the violence and trauma experienced by Roma individuals and communities? Further, to provide some promising research that can shed light on answering this question.

Education has an important role in the development of a student's social identity and intergroup relations. Research shows that individuals develop social categories and ethnic preferences at a

young age (Nesdale, 2004). This results in psychological and social meaning, and the assigning of group memberships that may create the divide between 'us' and 'them' (Ziv & Banaji, 2012). The further development of intergroup attitudes and conflict comes from interaction with cultural objects and discourses. Textbooks, as cultural objects, represent the larger society and interconnected cultural groups within the larger social and national identity, and they directly influence social discourse about cultural groups (Weninger & Williams, 2005).

A study by Doojse et al. (2006) was a foundational step finding that individual identification with the group identity of the perpetrators from past group-based injustice influences group-based guilt. Continuing scholarly work within the same theme provided evidence that support for reparation and forgiveness for past violence is influenced positively by the emotion of group-based guilt and shame (Brown & Cehajic, 2008) and negatively by dehumanization (Cehajic et al., 2009; Zebel et al., 2008). The extension of that line of research found that increased categorization with a perpetrator group (causal responsibility) increases group-based guilt, thus increasing a sense of moral responsibility toward the victim group (Zimmermann et al., 2011). The same study found that individuals seek to avoid or relieve their guilt either through rejecting causal responsibility or supporting group-based measures for redress or reparations.

The 2015 study by Figueiredo et al. heightened understanding of the ways people experience emotions generated by past events of injustice as a group, and the consequences these emotions have in intergroup relations. The study unearthed moral justification, advantageous comparisons, responsibility denial, and out-group blaming as conditions in which a person avoids guilt and moral responsibility. Subsequent research demonstrated the influence of the attitudes already mentioned on emotions of group-based anger, shame, and ingroup criticism, as well as support for reparations, importance in discussing the past, and forgiveness (Cehajic-Clancy et al., 2011; Figueiredo et al., 2015).

Overall, curricula and textbooks are key tools in developing national identities and common shared values, as well as definitions of society, a nation, and citizenship (Fuchs & Bock, 2018; Williams, 2014). There are a limited number of practices backed by research that can be applied to curricula and textbook development. These include: categorizing and prioritizing goals and identities outside of race or group affiliations, training the regulation of negative emotions, fostering empathy across groups, and real or imagined contact between groups (Cikara et al., 2011). In addition, children generally remember stereotypical portrayals better than those that counter stereotypes of groups outside their own race or ethnicity (Bigler & Liben, 1993).

Holocaust education has been used as a tool to combat discrimination and ensure that atrocities of the same nature do not happen again. Based on a transnational textbook study, Holocaust education has two main purposes: the presentation of historical knowledge, and civic and human rights education (Bromley & Russell, 2010). Intergovernmental organizations, civil society groups, and national governments understand these purposes of Holocaust education and the possibilities in developing positive intergroup attitudes among citizens through representations of past traumas. Specifically, these influential organizations are utilizing narratives within education, art, and other media about the Romani Holocaust to reduce the level of antigypsyism in Europe. These efforts target Roma youth through non-formal education and non-Roma youth through national educational reforms, as well as development of educational materials. However, there is little known about the impact on individual and collective beliefs towards Roma. Moreover, research has presented mixed results in reducing prejudice through evoking a traumatic event. A 2020 paper by Antoniou et al.

highlights the dilemma in Holocaust education, suggesting that while transforming a past trauma into a moral universal can mobilize resources, it can also obscure the suffering of others in a competing way and produce “a culture of national inwardness” and “glorify their suffering and relegate the suffering of others” (Antoniou et al., 2020).

These efforts are well received. However there is little empirical knowledge of how Romani Holocaust education actually influences intergroup attitudes in children and youth. Nevertheless, we can make some assumption about how the current representation of the Romani Holocaust in textbooks contributes to the continued anti-Roma attitudes in European societies. A recent study on this theme found that textbooks place too little importance on representing the Romani experience. The predominant perspective is from the viewpoint of the perpetrator, while a reinforcement of a victimhood status is prevalent, and there is a lack of assigning responsibility for past crimes. In addition, there is an absence of refuting or condemning the perpetrators’ actions (Pecak et al., forthcoming). The study evaluated 869 textbooks in 20 European countries. The findings showed that most of the representations of the Roma during World War II were presented in transitional or conative adverbs, such as “also” and “as well as”, and overwhelmingly as part of a list of other victims. Further, the second most common representation of Roma experiences was through the presentation of the numbers and technicalities of genocide, while there was a lack of Roma specific details such as individual voices or survivor stories. Overall, the study found that European textbooks do not dedicate space to conveying specific knowledge about the Romani experiences or promoting human rights education. Further, the representations may inadvertently reinforce anti-Roma attitudes and lack the ability to disparage prevalent racist social attitudes.

There is evidence that if an individual identifies with the perpetrators of past group-based violence there is an increase in group-based guilt and moral responsibility to rectify the past injustice (Doosje et al, 2006). This finding is supported by the study on Romani Holocaust representation as it was found that textbooks portray a dual distancing narrative (Pecak et al., forthcoming). This description can limit the connection of a collective ‘we’ to the past atrocities and distance the reader from the victims. Thus, limiting the possibility to develop any moral responsibility to ensure that Roma do not face more violence or discrimination in the present or the future. Further, textbook representations of the Romani Holocaust through a victimizing narrative can have an influence on intergroup attitudes. While there has not been much research on how victimizing discourses influence outgroup prejudice, a study by Antoniou et al. (2020) identified that if a group was primed on their own collective victimhood, it “generated antagonism with the other group acclaimed as victims”, which in their study increased antisemitism. This research presents the possibility that an increase in Romani Holocaust education could have an unintended impact, if the individuals receiving this education have salient group-based identities based on a past collective trauma.

With violence and discrimination towards Roma on the rise and with increased efforts to address anti-Roma attitudes with Romani Holocaust education, research to understand the actual impact of Romani Holocaust education on students’ intergroup attitudes is even more important. The majority of textbook and curricula research provides knowledge on how they mirror societal discourses, however there is little research on how educational discourses truly influence students’ intergroup attitudes. There are promising research lines that can provide the thematic and methodological approaches to accomplish this goal. For instance, some practices that have been successful in reducing prejudice and intergroup conflict. These can be translated into textbook lessons which include: the categorizing and prioritizing of goals and identities outside of race or group affiliations, training the regulation of negative emotions, fostering empathy across groups, and real or imagined

contact between groups (Cikara et al., 2011). International organizations and national governments must take into account the evidence and practices. However, more research is needed to ensure that efforts for reducing intergroup conflict do not have unintended consequences.

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Recommended Citation

Pecak, M. (2022). Romani Holocaust education: What is the actual influence on students' attitudes? *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 5(13).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.13.6

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