

Visualising War and Peace: Teaching Children about the Second World War

Introduction

The field of peace education addresses how we may build a future of global peace when our global history is filled with violence, war, and conflict. One proposal to achieve this is to focus on the upbringing of the next generation. (1) Teaching about historical war creates perceptions of war which can extend to visualisations of modern warfare. (2)

This project aims to provide an overview of how teaching war to children is approached in various settings, and to consider what visualisations of war and peace they promote.

Historical vs Current War

Resources advising on how to teach about current wars, such as the Russo-Ukraine war, all centre the emotional impact of learning about war. For example, the American Psychological Association advises to reassure children that they are safe, since the war is happening far away. (3) On the other hand, there are few resources with guidance on approaching teaching WWII to children. Online educational websites such as BBC Teach give only factual information. (4) Perhaps this distinction indicates an emotional distancing from historical events.

In contrast to teaching WWII, approaching the Holocaust is a widely researched topic. The resulting resources, such as booklets from the Holocaust Educational Trust, provide more advice for teachers to implement. (5) The distinction, then, is not as clear-cut as past vs present. Does this suggest that it is specifically historical war that children are desensitised to, justifying the horrors as being 'just a part of war'?

Finally, resources advising on teaching about the Russo-Ukraine war accentuate the possibility for nationality discrimination arising. Oxfam encourages teachers to distinguish between the Russian government and populace, highlighting protesting citizens. (6) The possibility for incidentally promoting anti-German sentiments while teaching WWII, is not highlighted to teachers. Is it assumed that children will distinguish between past and present? Or is it assumed that the 'blame' is assigned only to Hitler, not the German population?

References:

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“childhood is the time when the seeds of peace and conflict are sown”

- Lombardo & Polonko, *Peace Education and Childhood*

Horrible Histories

The TV show *Horrible Histories* teaches children about history through black comedy. Following the assumption that making jokes about current conflicts, such as the Russo-Ukraine war, would be deemed inappropriate, does the lack of controversy surrounding *Horrible Histories* imply a widespread emotional distancing from historical events?

On the one hand, comedy downplays the horrors of war, preventing the sketches from effectively discouraging war. On the other hand, comedy may be constructive in enabling the disturbing parts of war to be communicated to children without causing immense emotional distress.

Humour also enables the presentation of battle tactics without glorification. The 'Dodgy War Inventions' segments depict failed battle tactics, detracting from any notion that war tactics are 'cool'. However, at times the sketches do not provide an insight into the individual costs of war, focusing instead on Churchill's genius strategies.

The majority of the sketches about WWII cover the British perspective, including both of the dedicated songs, 'The Few' (RAF pilots) and 'WW2 Girls' (role of women during the war). Similarly, most sketches depict mainly Britain and Germany. This may encourage a reductive sentiment of good vs evil.

Another problem is the presentation of peace. In one sketch, Churchill argues with Chamberlain over whether Hitler should be appeased. Once Hitler's invasion occurs as Churchill predicted, his assertion that "war is the right choice" is implied to similarly be true. (7) Children may conclude that war is sometimes the only option, and that war is inevitable due to some humans refusing to co-operate.

3- American Psychological Association. 'Talking to kids about the war in Ukraine'. Accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2022/children-teens-war-ukraine>

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5- Holocaust Educational Trust. 'Teaching Resources'. Accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.het.org.uk/teaching-resources>

6- Oxfam. 'Talking about Ukraine in school?'. Accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.het.org.uk/teaching-resources>

7- BBC iPlayer. 'Horrible Histories Series 2: Episode 4'. Accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00any7b/horrible-histories-series-2-episode-4>

8- Imperial War Museum. 'Learning Sessions'. Accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/sessions>

9- Bradford Peace Museum. 'School Programme'. Accessed August 31, 2022, <https://thepeacemuseum.eu.rit.org.uk/school-programme>

War and Peace Museums

Museum visits provide unique and memorable learning experiences that may complement classroom learning and the National Curriculum.

IWM encourages children to understand the impact of war on the level of the individual costs through 'We Were There' learning sessions, wherein children can meet with eyewitnesses from the Second World War to the present day. Additionally, the 'Documentary Challenge' guides children to consider narratives about war, why certain elements have been preserved and remembered by history, and what story *they* want to tell. (8)

The approach of Bradford Peace Museum is more explicitly attuned to peace education. The museum aims to uncover and exhibit the lives of peacemakers that are commonly forgotten or unknown. The workshop 'Everyone Comes From Somewhere' explores the history of Bradford as a place welcoming refugees, in particular through the story of a nine-year-old Jewish boy who was part of the Kindertransport. (9)

As Bradford Peace Museum is the only accredited peace museum in the UK, the influence of peace museums is by far subordinate to that of war museums. If peace museums were to become more widespread, this would help achieve the aims of peace education to a greater extent. Peace museums could also be seen as an alternative to war museums for children who are too young to be able to cope with the emotional impact of learning about warfare.

Conclusions

This research project has revealed some of the complexities of integrating peace education.

The distinction in approach between teaching historical and current war suggests that there is an emotional distancing regarding historical war.

Museum activities demonstrate that children can be treated as independent thinkers while learning about war. The role of peace museums in particular has been highlighted.

Analysing *Horrible Histories* reveals some of the advantages and disadvantages of using humour to teach about war.

Finally, this project is limited by speculative reasoning. Surveying children would be beneficial in verifying the accuracy and extent of these inferences. This, in turn, would help in informing best practice models for approaching teaching war.

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