Challenges regarding the educational journeys of Israeli teenagers to Poland. Can P4C help teachers tackle them?

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Abstract: Is it imperative to travel to Poland to understand what happened during the Holocaust? Don’t these journeys inspire participants with strong nationalist feelings at the expense of more universal values of tolerance and humanity? In other words, don’t these expeditions sometimes become a lever for cultivating pure nationalism, precisely due to the heightened “Avenging Victim” self-awareness emanating from the emotional experience? Acknowledging this strong current of opinion and without ignoring these genuine risks, the article argues in favor of the necessity of these educational journeys, deeming that when it comes to preserving the memory of the Holocaust and its lessons to the younger generation, there is no substitute for visiting the places where the Holocaust occurred, for the impression that such a visit leaves on the participants, and for the enhancement of knowledge and understanding of the subject. Further, it expresses hope that philosophy for children can bring a most welcome thinking skills-based support to this latter view.

Key-words: Holocaust education; philosophy for children; inter-cultural understanding; emotions;

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Introduction

As it will be detailed below, the educational journeys to Poland are not unanimously acclaimed, not even accepted in Israel, for various reasons. From students’ educational, well-being and harmonious development points of view, objections of the types mentioned in the present study are also acknowledged by and represent a real concern and challenge for the supporters of these trips like myself. In the face of these growing challenges, more needs to be done in order to prevent radicalization caused by the overwhelming feelings of victimhood and abandonment to destruction experienced emphatically on behalf of members of their earlier generations, and the desire to prove compensatory strength and worth.

There is a risk that these young people and future adults will not fall within the scope of what modern, global citizenship-oriented education aims to instill in the young generations:

To give them a sense of belonging, of being in and of the world, and a joyful sense of their connection with other people and places … [and] give time and space and gentle encouragement to enable children to stop and reflect on who they are, what they think and feel about the world and about in what way they are part of the world. (Streicher et al., 2018, p. 3).

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is presented, in the same study, as the best means by which students can reach, with the support of their teachers and wider educational environments, these objectives. As a global promoting body, UNESCO sets forward three fundamental dimensions of Global Citizenship Education, which cannot be cut down to a basic set of skills or cognitive knowledge: cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral. Powered by P4C, GCE equips educators (together with their students) to turn education into transformative action grounded in ethical and political values. Thus designed, GCE facilitates the development of soft skills and attitudes among learners enabling them to engage in international cooperation and intercultural understanding (Streicher et al., p. 3).

However, when it comes to the descendants of victims of a catastrophe of such magnitude as the Holocaust, P4C is faced with additional challenges, almost not explored to date; and, when they were, P4C was almost exclusively addressed to children with no direct connection to this tragedy, from the perspective of combating racism and
anti-Semitism (e.g. Lyle 2016; TES, 22.02.2018; TES, 19.09.2019; UNESCO & OSCE/ODIHR, 2020); To our knowledge, hardly any P4C methodological approach was designed for children descending from the victims’ side, especially given that P4C neglect in Israel’s education is a known fact (Kizel, 2020). With respect to P4C, this article is just a preliminary urge to introduce it, as its unique combination of tools aimed at the development of cognitive, meta-cognitive and emotional skills, could help this category of young people better cope with the overwhelmingly traumatic event which is the Holocaust.

**The journeys to Poland**

Students’ expeditions to the death camps in Poland is one of the main manifestations of the Holocaust and its commemoration. In the mid-1960s, two attempts were made to take high school student delegations to Poland. Both delegations departed, but the severed diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel after the Six-Day War brought the project to a halt. The two groups were organized by Ferdka Mazia, who survived the Holocaust as a member of the Zionist Youth Movement and was the founder of Masshua, the Institute for Holocaust Studies in Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak. In the early 1980s, youth delegations to Poland resumed at the United Kibbutz Movement and National kibbutz initiative. The heightened interest in the Holocaust by the Kibbutz Movements was not only because the issue gained an important status in the Israeli public discourse but also meant to reiterate the role of these movements in the historical period in question. Teenagers were sent to represent the movements on the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the opening of the Jewish Pavilion at Auschwitz.

The Israeli education system is committed to inspiring the morals and educational significance of the Holocaust in the younger generations, who will shape the future of the People and State of Israel. This monumental task is both of Jewish and Universal importance. In the spirit of this vision, the Ministry of Education outlines an academic course aimed at strengthening youths’ connection with their Jewish past, exploring the spiritual and cultural richness of Jewish life in pre-World War II Europe, deepening identification with the fate of the Jewish people and enhancing the sense of commitment to the continuity of Jewish life and the sovereign...
existence of the State of Israel as a Zionist, democratic and Humanist state. Another goal is an acquaintance with Nazi ideology, motives, and circumstances that led to the rise of the Third Reich to power in Germany.

The culmination of the educational process is a Youth Expedition to Poland entitled “It is My Brother I Seek”. The journey takes place during the school year, either on school days or during one of the school breaks.

The Youth Delegations to Poland Headquarters, in the youth and social administration, is in charge of the entire process: setting a date for the departure of the expedition, training officials, following the students' preparation process in Israel, approving the itinerary, supervising the operation in Poland and supporting the processing and summary in the journey's aftermath. The headquarters is in full cooperation with the Ministry of Defense and the General Security Service.

The complexity of the journey requires close cooperation between many ministries and officials, both during the preparation stage, the execution stage, and the educational process following the return home. In 1988, the first youth delegation, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, traveled to Poland, under the campaign called “It is My Brother I Seek”. Youth delegations to Poland that the Ministry of Education did not sponsor made the journey well before 1988. For example, in 1983, youth groups from the Kibbutz Movement traveled to Poland to mark the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. In the pamphlet prepared for the first delegations traveling to Poland, the then Minister of Education, Yitzhak Navon, wrote:

Poland, which for centuries was one of the most important Jewish centers in the world, is now almost completely devoid of Jews. Poland became one great cemetery, where millions of Jews were slaughtered, exterminated, and burnt... Visiting Pre-Holocaust Jewish centers... After the visit, you shall understand the very meaning of the State of Israel's existence and the importance of strengthening and fortifying it. You will also understand the importance of solidarity with the people of Israel, worldwide (Navon, 1990, p. 1).

For years on end, there has been a vigorous public debate in Israel over the issue of student delegations to Poland. Some support the continuation of expeditions in the current format, others seek comprehensive changes to the expeditionary exit format and a third group
rules out the departure of student delegations to Poland. Further, I will address the arguments for and against the journey and its role in shaping the memory of the Holocaust for youth and high school students in the Official Education Curriculum in the State of Israel. In 2003, the then Minister of Education, Limor Livnat, decided that the Ministry of Education would, for the first time, assume responsibility for coordinating all student and youth delegations to Poland, and in the process determine, by tender, the maximum cost for participation in the delegations and the minimum level of services required by the operational bodies. This move by the Ministry of Education led to an immediate increase in students taking part in these delegations to Poland: from 16,000 students in 2002 to 22,455 students in 2003.

**Educational Goals of the journey to Poland**

These goals are as follows: a) familiarity with the history of the Jewish people, the heritage of Israel and the Jewish tradition, the memory of the Holocaust and Heroism; b) familiarity with the spiritual and cultural richness of Jewish life in Poland before World War II in its full scope and activity; c) studying the principles of Nazi ideology, the motives, and circumstances that led to the rise of the Nazis to power; d) exploring the foundations of the totalitarian regime under which Nazi Germany declared a war of destruction against Jews, murdered a third of the Jewish people, and committed additional crimes against humanity; e) producing a nationalistic lesson: the need for a sovereign Jewish state; f) and a universal lesson: the duty to protect and defend democracy and fight against any form of racism; g) studying the policies and measures taken by the Nazis to realize the “new ideology and order” in Europe and Nazi-occupied territories during World War II; h) Introducing the brave stance and struggle for life of the Jews during the Holocaust; i) Teaching the Holocaust in a direct, experiential way; j) Familiarity with the great rabbis who operated on Polish soil over the years.

**Educational - Value-related goals**

The value-related educational include the following: a) reinforcing the connection of young Israelis with their Jewish past, deepening their identification with the fate of the Jewish people, strengthening their personal commitment to the continuity of Jewish life and the sovereign
existence of the State of Israel; b) understanding the complexity of the relationship between Jews and Poles throughout the shared history of these two peoples, with both positive and negative sides in mind, understanding the history of Polish Jews and their heritage against the backdrop of Polish history and culture; c) re-defining and examining concepts, assumptions, and thinking patterns related to the history of Israel, Jewish behavior in the Holocaust, Zionism values, relations between Jews and non-Jews, and the values of morality and humanism; d) restoration, renovation, cleaning, and preservation of Jewish sites and relics scattered throughout Poland (only if permission of local authorities or communities is granted); e) understanding the danger inherent in undemocratic forms of governance, while deepening the commitment to safeguard and defend democracy and fight against any form of racism.

**Personal-Social Goals**

This category of goals include: a) discussion of social and ethical questions; b) Cultivating leadership among students; c) Encounters with Polish teenagers; c) allowing the youth to actively participate in a representative delegation on behalf of the State of Israel.

**Itinerary**

The itinerary deals with three content circles: a) a thousand years of Polish Jewry on display through tours of the towns, synagogues, and cemeteries; b) World War II and the Holocaust, a theme reflected in tours of the ghettos, concentration camps, death camps, and killing pits; c) Polish history and the complex tissue of relations between Jews and Poles.

**Preparing teens for the journey to Poland**

The bulk of the preparation process is supposed to be done in the community itself: in the school and in the youth movement. Responsibility for the preparation process rests, as stated, with the accompanying educator, who will also share insights with the group guide, counselors, history teachers, lecturers, Testimony Bearers, parents, and family members. The preparation process must be done using a variety of methods, including, among other things, lectures, workshops, case studies, discussions and conversations, role-playing and hand-held exercises, reading selected articles and analyzing historical documents, deciphering
photographs and using maps, watching documentaries and feature films, visiting museums and meeting Holocaust survivors. Teens should be engaged in various tasks, such as preparing research and work on relevant topics, collecting background material from online databases, reading selected books, and presenting the products to the group members. They should also be encouraged to express their feelings and thoughts through creative and artistic means. After being selected for the journey and forming the group, they must meet with the various chaperones, begin introductory activities, and prepare for the expedition. The preparation process must be spread over a period of approximately four months before the journey to Poland and include fifty hours of study.

**Main areas of preparation**

The preparation process will include four main areas: academic preparation, social and emotional preparation, national commitment preparation, and organizational and security preparation, according to the following itinerary: Academic preparation - 25 hours; Social and emotional preparation - 10 hours; Preparation for National Commitment - 5 hours; Organizational-Security preparation - 5 hours; Homecoming - 5 hours.

**Arguments for and against student delegations to Poland**

For years on end, there has been a vigorous public debate in Israel over the issue of student delegations to Poland. Some support the continuation of the delegations in the current format; others seek comprehensive changes to these expeditions’ format, whereas a third group rules out any further departure of student delegations to Poland. As mentioned above, in Israeli society, there is a public discussion on student delegations to Poland, where substantive questions concerning the memory of the Holocaust by younger generations in Israel are discussed. For example, a question repeatedly arises of whether it is imperative to travel to Poland to understand what happened during the Holocaust. Among the arguments supporting the continuation of delegations to Poland: 1) When it comes to guiding the memory of the Holocaust and its lessons to the younger generation, there is no substitute for visiting the places where the Holocaust occurred, for the impression that such a visit leaves on the participants, and for the enhancement of knowledge and understanding of the subject – that is, if the visit is part of
an ongoing educational process. 2) Youth delegations to Poland that the Ministry of Education did not sponsor traveled even before 1988. For example, in 1983, youth groups from the Kibbutz Movement traveled to Poland to mark the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. 3) Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Culture Yitzhak Navon’s “It is My brother I Seek”. 4) The journey to Poland is a formative experience for teenagers who participate in the expeditions. It contributes greatly to the consolidation of their Jewish and Israeli identity. 5) The visit to Poland is an important link in educating the younger generation to better understand the connection between the Jewish People’s past, establishing the State of Israel, Israel in the present day, and the timeline between the Holocaust and Revival. 6) The journey to Poland allows students to get acquainted with the Jewish world and rich Jewish lives before the Holocaust. 7) The journey to Poland facilitates unique encounters between Israeli and Polish youth, helping to refute stereotypes and understand the changes occurring in Polish society.

Opponents to the delegations to Poland in their current form

The contestants of the educational trips argue that: 1) An expedition to Poland is not necessary for commemorating the Holocaust and its lessons for the younger generation; an alternative “journey” can be formulated, focusing, for example, on Israeli Holocaust-related sites, meeting survivors, and hearing Testimony Bearers’ stories. Alternatively, one could take a journey expanding your acquaintance with other large Jewish communities’ past, some of which have experienced the Holocaust (e.g., in North Africa). 2) The expeditions to Poland focus on the destruction of Jewish life in the Holocaust and not enough on Jewish cultural and creative lives that existed in Europe before the Holocaust. 3) The high cost of embarking on the expeditions to Poland prevents many teenagers from going, despite their interest, thus creating economic discrimination towards students who cannot afford it. 4) The journey to Poland, in its current scheme, inspires participants with strong nationalist feelings at the expense of more universal values of tolerance and humanity. 5) The journey to Poland evokes amongst some students’ strong emotional reactions. It is unclear to what extent these could be addressed during the expeditions. 6) The journey to Poland fuels hatred towards that very country, as it is characterized by its past and present hostility towards the
Jewish people, completely ignoring Poland’s respectable past and its positive attitudes towards the State of Israel in recent decades, as well as the revival of Polish Jewry. 7) There is a gap between the journey’s objectives and the experience of the so-called “trip” among teenagers, which set forth behavioral problems during the journey (also resulting from the over-zealous nationalist feelings mentioned above). It damages Israel’s image in Polish society and the world at large.

**The Effects of the Expeditions to Poland on Teenagers**

Both Ministry of Education officials and school administrators argue that these journeys, which still occur today, significantly impact the attitudes of those teenagers participating in them towards the Holocaust and that a great deal of knowledge is acquired during the preparations stage and the journey itself. These factors highlight the importance of Testimony Bearers in the learning process as a source of knowledge and pride in Jewish endurance during the Holocaust. However, some argue that Holocaust teaching through youth delegations to commemorating sites misses some of the teaching objectives, including those of the Ministry of Education, whose stated goal is to draw Universal Lessons. For those advocating this position, these expeditions take on an exaggerated emotional dimension, and they cannot be a substitute for engaging and delving into the history of the Holocaust.

These expeditions sometimes become a lever for cultivating pure nationalism, precisely due to the heightened ‘Avenging Victim’ self-awareness emanating from the emotional experience. This effect weighs heavily on the teaching of the subject as a critical study, enabling questions from the field of comparative history. Malka Cohen, herself an educator, argued in this regard that “the educational actions should strive to create a Jewish-collective based on positive internal foundations, and avoid inspiring a sense of perpetual injustice in students, which might justify attitudes and actions resulting from it” (Cohen, 2010, p. 14). According to Cohen, youth expeditions to Poland have recently taken a turn towards Roots Seeking and better understanding of “Shtetl Culture” and less towards becoming a tool for boosting the national ethos. Ever since youth expeditions to Poland began, including the “March of Life”, studies attempted to examine the meaning of that journey and its effects on youngsters, their conduct, values and opinions, and evidently, their
attitudes towards the Holocaust in particular, and Judaism in general. Although all of these studies have been conducted responsibly, with reliable research tools, the fact that the studied population is presumably biased should still be considered. Teenagers’ very choice to embark on the journey, participate in the thorough preparations beforehand, undergo a physically challenging route, and even more so, an emotional one, indicates a high level of emotional attitude to the Holocaust and a deep interest in it. Thus, the results of these studies regarding the participants’ attitude and involvement in issues concerning the fate of Jews during the Holocaust are almost self-evident. The journey is a vivid component of informal education and is managed by The Social and Youth Administration entrusted with informal schooling in the education system. But even within the journey itself, it seems that the influence of the informal elements, represented by the survivors or participants’ family stories, outweighs the educational, scholarly, and values the guides convey. Therefore, the expeditions to Poland became the main educational tool in Holocaust studies, alongside the educational work done in commemorative institutions.

As an educator who has accompanied her students six times during the journey to Poland, I have a number of personal insights into the subject: 1) The issue of students’ preparation for the journey is of great importance. The plan should address all aspects of the journey: Theoretical preparation - 25 hours; Social and emotional preparation - 10 hours; Preparation for national commitment - 5 hours; Organizational - security preparation - 5 hours; Return home - 5 hours. 2) Admission interviews – Care should be taken to conduct student admissions interviews. Each student will be required to write a letter detailing his or her reasons for participating in the journey to Poland. A student with emotional difficulties should not be allowed to travel for fear of harming his/her mental well-being. 3) Obligation to attend all meetings of the preparation program. The obligation to participate in all stages of the program indicates the seriousness of the student to take part in the journey to Poland. 4) Preparation of various assignments by the student during the preparation program. Each student will be required to prepare a number of assignments during the preparation program. The tasks can be individual tasks or group tasks. For example: writing a reading report of a book on the subject of the Holocaust; preparation of a guide on one of the sites on
the journey to Poland; presenting the work of a personality who influenced people around them during the Holocaust. 5) Instructing the students’ parents about the importance of the students’ journey. The parents of the students should be involved and explained the significance of their children’s participation in the journey to Poland, the expectations from the students, the tasks they are required to perform, etc. It is recommended that a joint meeting of parents, school staff, tour guides and students, is held. In this session, students will make presentations of assignments that were required to be carried out. 6) Obligation of school staff to participate in all preparation sessions. Teachers, like students, are required to attend all preparation program sessions. They need to perceive themselves partners, which contributes to the success of the journey. By their participation, they set a personal example to the students. 7) A good coordination with tour guides to Poland is expected. The journeys to Poland are usually led by professional instructors in collaboration with schoolteachers, so it is important to coordinate the tour goals between the instructors and the school teaching staff in terms of the journey program preparation and overall planning. 8) Participation in the preparation of ceremonies during the journey: reading texts, singing, etc. 9) Avoidance of national symbols. Care should be taken to avoid excessive national markings, such as provocatively waving flags while visiting sites in Poland. 10) Imparting universal values and strengthening them. Care must be taken to emphasize universal values during the preparation program and during the journey to Poland: justice, honesty, conscience, compassion, benevolence, and avoid bringing content that meets the definition of “pornography of the Holocaust”. 11) Careful planning of several meetings for students who go on the journey to Poland, in order to process their experiences.

I think the journey to Poland is a powerful experience for students, for it contributes significantly to the shaping of the Holocaust memory. The student participates in the journey after learning the historical background during history lessons, and the journey to Poland completes his knowledge and experiences. It is important to continue to develop programs on the subject of the Holocaust, which will make this topic relevant to the youth and will ensure the development of students’ interest in all aspects of it: educational, experiential and emotional (Barak, 2021).
Instead of conclusion: Philosophy for children, a big helping hand ... at hand

As already stated above, P4C appears to me as an extremely resourceful interactive mind competencies and emotional intelligence training practice, arguably able to increase significantly the chances of fostering beneficial changes in the attitudes of the youngsters at risk to be negatively affected by these trips. At the end of an ample review of the most relevant research-based studies of P4C outcomes, K. J. Topping and S. Trickey conclude:

Ten studies [of] P4C [results] in primary and high schools met the stringent criteria for inclusion, measuring outcomes by norm-referenced tests of reading, reasoning, cognitive ability, and other curriculum-related abilities, by measures of self-esteem and child behavior, and by child and teacher questionnaires. All studies showed [...] a consistent [...] positive effect for P4C on a wide range of outcome measures (Topping and Trickey, 2004, p. 379).

As many of its promoters do no tire of pointing out, P4C (whose initiator is the American philosopher of education Matthew Lipman) is not just a pedagogic system of techniques of stimulating thinking abilities. It encompasses numerous “specific resources and methods of tapping into and encouraging children’s curiosity and natural propensity toward interconnectivity”; endorses their quest for sense, encourages and fuels their intellectual courage and “helps them rigorously develop skills that enable them to make correct judgments in their day-to-day lives, but also stimulate and enhance empathy, compassion, acceptance and tolerance.” (Lobont, 2019, p. 67). A report of such accomplishments of the P4C programs in New Zealand reads that P4C gives all students a “voice” as well as teaching those appropriate ways to express themselves and to have their contributions heard. The voices of all students are encouraged and included in classroom dialogue. A range of co-operative skills [including] ... listening to each other; thinking about and building on each other’s ideas; respecting everyone’s ideas..., create a space in which students can interact with both gentleness and rigor. This in turn allows students to
hear, appreciate and challenge each other’s thoughts and perspectives, and often leads to a new valuing of [their dialogue partners] (P4C, 2021).

The practice of P4C turns the learners’ groups into “communities of enquiry”, which enhance the “understanding [of] the issues [under discussion] or the beliefs of other participants. Argument is seen as a collaborative effort to come to the best answer to a question” (P4C.com, 2018). The trained teachers and other P4C facilitators develop practices that are organized in four categories: encourage questioning, develop concepts, encourage dialogue and argument, and work for reasonableness (P4C.com, 2018). Moreover, all four interconnected types of thinking stimulated and developed by P4C, that is, caring, collaborative, critical and creative, also include a strong and profound social-emotional skill which encourages and structures the interpersonal attitudes that make up the relational side of children’s and teenagers’ selves (Lobont, 2019, p. 69). In Lipman’s words, the arguments these communities’ members learn to use are deeply social and communal. The reflective model’s objective is to articulate the friction-causing differences in the community, develop arguments in support of the competing claims, and then, through deliberation, achieve an understanding of the larger picture that will permit more objective judgment (Lipman, 2003, p. 25).

Last, but not least, it is of great importance D. Spiteri’s research conclusion that, owing to their profound dialogic critique and entailed acceptance of diversity, the communities of enquiry essentially contribute to the enhancement of intercultural and inter-subjective sensitivity (Spiteri, 2010). I can only hope that, sooner rather than later, the Israeli educational system in general, the Holocaust educational trips to Poland pedagogy in particular, will introduce and ripe the benefits of P4C.

References