

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's Continuity and Change Research Study

THIRD DATA RELEASE - *THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS* IN ENGLISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS

KEY MESSAGE

In 2016, research published by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education reported that many young people appeared to draw mistaken and/or misleading conclusions about the Holocaust based on their engagement with the narrative of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The Centre's most recent research now also reveals that, across England, the book and its film adaptation are in fact currently being used by over a third of teachers in their lessons on the Holocaust. Moreover, the research also documents that in some schools the use of the narrative has become a site of contention and dispute between colleagues and across subject departments.

SUMMARY

A recent UCL Centre for Holocaust Education survey asked teachers to identify which, if any, books and films they used with students in their lessons on the Holocaust. In total, 35% indicated that they used *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* within their teaching (29% reported using the book and 26% used the film).

Earlier research conducted by the Centre (published in 2016) raised concerns about the influence of John Boyne's widely popular narrative on young people's knowledge and understanding of this complex and important history. The study reported, for example, that the story regularly elicited profound and often somewhat misplaced sympathy for German and even Nazi families whom, students argued, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* helped them to see as 'victims' too. Moreover, while most young people who took part in the study recognised the narrative as a work of fiction and many were able to identify and critique its most glaringly implausible plot-points or historical inaccuracies, they nonetheless overwhelmingly characterised it as 'realistic' and/or 'truthful'. In many students' accounts, their understanding of the story contributed significantly to one of the most powerful and problematic misconceptions of this history, that 'ordinary Germans' held little responsibility and were by and large 'brainwashed' or otherwise entirely ignorant of the unfolding atrocities.

For these reasons, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* occupies a somewhat contested position as a potential educational resource. Indeed, several participants in UCL's most recent teacher study suggested that they used the text reluctantly, offered it as an example to problematise or had lobbied to remove the use of either the text or film anywhere within their schools. Most respondents did not indicate this level of critical reflexivity however and a significant minority of teachers explicitly expressed 'nervousness' and concern about the 'danger' of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* being used without careful and critical framing by colleagues in their own and other schools.

BACKGROUND

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education builds all its work with schools and teachers on an ongoing programme of classroom based empirical research. When the Centre's researchers first surveyed over 1,000 teachers in 2008 and 2009, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* did not feature significantly in any of their accounts. The book had been published two years previously, but the feature film only just released.

However, concerns as to both the book and film's relationship to the historical record were soon raised by both academics and specialist educators working in this field. The late British historian of the Holocaust David Cesarani, for example, decried the book as 'utterly implausible', 'a travesty of facts' and 'a distortion of history'¹. Such concerns became increasingly salient with its rising popularity and prominence and so, when the Centre embarked on a national study of young people's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust in 2015, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* became a specific object of enquiry. This study drew on a survey of almost 8,000 secondary school aged students across England and included focus group interviews with 44 young people explicitly to explore their engagement with the film.

The Centre's most recent research was a return to England's secondary classrooms to identify continuity and change in teaching practice over the last ten years. Survey data was collected from almost 1,000 teachers during 2019 and 2020 and group interviews were conducted with 134 teachers from 45 different schools. It is this study, which informs the research findings reported here.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED FINDINGS

- The Centre's 2016 research with students confirmed the widespread familiarity and popularity of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* among secondary school aged students in England. **It was, by a large margin, the most read book and most watched film among 8,000 secondary school aged students surveyed.** (84% of all those who had seen any film about or related to the Holocaust had seen *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and 75% of all those who had read anything about or related to the Holocaust had read the book).
- Focus group interviews with 44 students further revealed a number of ways in which historical inaccuracies within **the film served to introduce and/or reinforce significant misunderstandings and misconceptions about this history, most notably the mistaken perception that 'ordinary German's were by and large ignorant of the unfolding atrocities.**
- These **focus groups also emphasised the significant power of the narrative in (re)framing Germans – and in some cases even Nazis – as 'victims too':**

Well we always think of the Nazis as the bad guys and this [the film of the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas] shows that the Holocaust didn't just affect the Jews.
(Extract from interview with Year 9 student, London).

I feel sorry for practically everybody who was under Hitler's control. [. . .] And it doesn't matter who was the bigger victim, they were all still victims of Hitler's

¹ Cesarani, David. (2008) 'From the pulpit: Striped Pyjamas'. *Literary Review*, 359, 3.

control in some shape or form. (Extract from interview with Year 11 student, West Midlands).

- **The majority of students who were interviewed recognised that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was a work of fiction, and many were able to identify and challenge the implausibility of certain key plot points or historical inaccuracies.** However, most described the work as, if not wholly ‘accurate’ nonetheless ‘realistic’ and ‘truthful’. Crucially, **many appeared to draw on and at times directly reference the film in terms of how they made sense of and understood this complex and challenging past.**
- Among almost 1,000 teachers surveyed in 2019 and 2020, **35% reported that they used the book and/or film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* with students when teaching about the Holocaust.**
- The use of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in teaching varied by school subject. **80% of surveyed teachers who taught about the Holocaust within English or Drama lessons used either the book or the film with their students.** The book or text was also used by **49% of those who taught about the Holocaust within Citizenship, PSHE or related assemblies/tutor time, 27% of those teaching in Religious Education and 32% of those teaching in history.**
- Survey analysis also suggests that, **the more specialist training teachers have received in teaching about the Holocaust, the less likely they are to incorporate *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.** 54% of teachers who had never received any formal training in this area reported using the book and/or film within their teaching compared to only 31% of those who had.
- Only 9% of teachers who had taken part in the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education’s own high engagement CPD programmes reported using the book and/or film within their teaching. Among this small group of teachers, more than half explained they drew on the text to encourage students to consider and/or critique its historical accuracy (others did not elaborate on how they used the text).
- Across survey responses and especially during interview, **many teachers seemed to be aware of the potential criticisms of using *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in an educational context** and some directly expressed their reluctance to do so:

I find teaching the Holocaust through BISP as an English teacher problematic. I would much rather teach through literature which centred the Jewish experience but am limited by my school's approach. (Extract of survey response from NQT English teacher, South West)

- A vocal minority of teachers suggested that they, ‘only use *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* to be critical of it as a form of Holocaust representation’, ‘to illustrate the flaws of learning through film due to misleading information’, ‘to explain why I do not like it from a historical perspective’, or more baldly, ‘to say how bad the film is’ (Survey responses from Deputy Headteacher, London; History teacher, West Midlands; Head of History, West Midlands; Religious Education teacher, South East)

- Within interview, **several teachers outlined the specific concern – or the ‘challenge’ – that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* either introduced or reinforced problematic misconceptions that then needed to be overcome:**

Students come to us and literally think the Holocaust IS The Boy In the Striped Pyjamas, so that is a massive issue. (Extract from interview with History teacher, North East)

Teacher A: [For us a big challenge], is year seven English, teaching The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas. Which I think [for] a lot of them, [is] their only font of knowledge about the Holocaust...

Teacher B: ... so they are kind of aware of it, but it's just from that book . . . And it's kind of shaking that out of them. . . They kind of think The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas was the Holocaust.

(Extracts from interview with History teachers, North West)

- In some interviews this closely echoed the same specific distortions revealed in the earlier student research:

I think one of my issues is students do come with some very inaccurate ideas about the Holocaust, mainly from reading things like The Boy With The Striped Pyjamas, which is their ‘in’ to the Holocaust. I think that’s their first real encounter with the Holocaust, so they come with some ideas that are incorrect, ideas that nobody knew about the Holocaust, that people were completely in the dark about it.

. . . That’s the biggest one . . . Then they feel sorry for the German guard (Extract from interview with History teacher, North West)

- As a consequence, **a number of history subject specialists described their attempt to address what they framed as shortcomings or potential ‘issues’ in colleagues from other departments continuing to use either the film or text:**

Currently we have an interpretation question that asks them to look at an interpretation of The Boy In the Striped Pyjamas, because I have a huge issue with The Boy In the Striped Pyjamas: our primary schools teach it, our English department still have the novel, so we actually . . . if they won’t get rid of it, we have incorporated it into ours. So they look at interpretations and argue why the interpretation isn’t correct (Extract from interview with History teacher, North East)

- **Some went further describing their continued effort – in some cases described as ‘massive argument’s or ‘major battles’ – to try and persuade colleagues not to use the text or film at all with varying degrees of success:**

[In my own subject] it’s very much taught with a historical discipline, which is kind of the massive, massive, massive argument with English about The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas. You can’t play loose with historical facts when you’re talking about the Holocaust (Extract from interview with History and Philosophy teacher, East Midlands).

- Other teachers were able to outline some of the reasons schools and teachers might be reluctant to move away from the *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and the value they felt it still held:

We study Boyne's book as a text, focusing on language, characters and themes: Friendship vs prejudice; childhood innocence vs adult delusion/prejudice; The way language is used to demonise and dehumanise people; Why seemingly ordinary people might do extraordinarily evil things, and how a person might be good in some respects and very evil in others. I know that Boyne's book has been criticised for not being 100% historically accurate, and I explain this to the pupils, but I also explain why and how it has been constructed as a fictional vehicle for universal truths, and why some poetic licence is necessary. (Survey response from English teacher, West Midlands)

One described how she used to use the book until her history colleague explained it was problematic. She recounted that she had removed it from her scheme of work, but still expressed some disappointment: *I could see the drawbacks in the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, but part of me still felt that it was relevant, but maybe a relevance that was beyond history* (Extract from interview with English teacher, Yorkshire and Humberside).

- In other schools the approach between departments was more conciliatory. **The Centre's research also identified examples of practice where colleagues felt able to support each other across two or more subjects to directly address the limitations of the narrative from a purely historical point of view.** For example, in one interview an English and history specialist described working together. As the English teacher (an NQT) explained:

I've dedicated . . . a lesson to it this year, which was different to the previous year, to give them that context, the formal definition, that understanding, before we then set them reading tasks and to go away. Then, how we'd monitor that is once a week we'd check in on the chapters they have read, we discuss key events in the text, and relate that back to the historical context as well, while reminding them all the time that this is fiction (SE4: F1).

REFLECTION

It is difficult to overstate the prominence and familiarity of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* among secondary school aged students across England (and beyond). As author John Boyne describes, 'for a generation of young people around the world' the narrative has become 'their first introduction to a study of the Holocaust.'² As such, and as Boyne continues, the text 'holds a responsibility in itself'. But while Boyne emphasises that he has 'always made sure to impress on young readers the fact that this is a work of fiction – a fable', both the UCL Centre for Holocaust's 2016 research with students and the recent experience of classroom teachers suggest that, even when they recognise the story as fictional, many young people nonetheless continue to draw heavily on *The Boy in the*

² Boyne, John (2021) "An image came into my head of two little boys sitting on either side of a fence" – John Boyne on *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/06/an-image-came-into-my-head-of-two-little-boys-sitting-on-either-side-of-a-fence-john-boyne-on-the-boy-in-the-striped-pyjamas>

Striped Pyjamas as a reference point for ‘understanding’ what the Holocaust was ‘really like’ and how it could have come about.

In this regard, it is very important to:

- first acknowledge the ongoing frequency with which both the novel and feature film are currently being used explicitly within educational contexts – in almost a third of history lessons on the Holocaust and 80% in English and/or Drama classrooms; and then
- critically consider the manners in which both the novel and film are being used in schools. Crucially it is important for educators to consider how well-equipped young people are at different stages to be able to meaningfully critique the experiences of the *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*’s protagonists against the historical record. This requires sufficient opportunity for thoughtful cross-curricular cooperation and shared planning to sequence educational encounters with the Holocaust in such a way that common and unhelpful misconceptions and/or distortions of this important history are not allowed to take root unchallenged.

The use of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* when teaching young people about the Holocaust should therefore be treated with extreme caution; we have seen that it can perpetuate a number of dangerous inaccuracies and fallacies about the mass murder, not least that in some way ordinary German citizens were equal ‘victims’, and that only Hitler (or a small number of senior Nazis) was responsible for what took place.

It is not impossible to use the book or the film in the classroom with sensitivity and insight, but we would urge teachers to think extremely carefully before they do. As our research shows, too often this is not happening with the right level of context and warnings – and that as a result worrying ideas about culpability are being allowed to take hold.

As Centre Programme Director Ruth-Anne Lenga reflects,

As a work of fiction and drama this book and associated film may have some worth, but as a resource for teaching this important history it is flawed. Even if used solely to identify the errors and mistruth inherent within it, students would need to already have established sound historical, evidence-based knowledge to be able to do that. With time for teaching this subject being a major challenge in schools across the country, this would, in many cases, simply not work.

The potential for giving young people the impression that ordinary Germans were in some way ‘victims’ of the Holocaust is insensitive and dangerous. With the rise in antisemitism, such as it is in this country, and that so often manifests through trivialisation, distortion and denial of the Holocaust, this book could potentially do more harm than good.