Tools for addressing resistance, dehumanisation and emotional overload in Holocaust education



What is the purpose of these tools?

According to a report published by the KARTA Centre Foundation, **84.6%** of the teachers and educators surveyed agree that they lack teaching tools to deal with students' difficult emotions, and **60.4%** believe that their studies did not prepare them to deal with emotions in the classroom. At the same time, **70%** of teachers report a lack of available materials illustrating the mechanisms of manipulation and disinformation.

Link to the report

This collection of teaching tools aims to address the issues raised by teachers by supplementing their toolkit with resources to support work on difficult historical topics, particularly regarding resistance, prejudice and students' emotional overload.

Before using specific methods or exercises from the collection, we suggest reading all the recommendations. We hope that this brief overview of the proposed topics will facilitate teachers' daily teaching efforts.

Guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust

When teaching about the Holocaust, teachers may encounter behaviour from pupils that is difficult to accept or even unacceptable. Pupils may breach the guidelines, either consciously or unconsciously, through jokes, hurtful comparisons, hate speech, or provocative questions and comments. Each of these situations requires a response from the teacher.

Simply saying that something is not allowed is often not enough. Students may ask why it is forbidden. They may also view the teacher's reaction as a restriction on their freedom of expression. It is therefore advisable to establish the rules of discussion in advance. Clear rules help maintain order in the lesson and show students that the teacher's requirements are not arbitrary.

A good practice in psychological workshops or support groups is to draw up a so-called contract. A contract is a set of rules governing interactions within the group, including the manner of communication and the subject area of the work.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD CONTRACT

A good contract can make it easier for the teacher to refer to previously agreed rules when tension, laughter, comments that violate others' dignity, or hate speech arise in the classroom.

Another advantage of the contract is that it reduces interpersonal uncertainty among participants, which in the classroom context means students are more willing to cooperate and share their emotions honestly.

Given the reality of school life, where there is little time for Holocaust education, the contract should be short, specific and easy to understand. We recommend presenting pupils with a few points written in simple language using positive phrasing, that is, describing desired behaviours rather than prohibitions. It is also important to discuss the contract with the pupils, encouraging them to ask questions and suggest individual changes. Pupils should agree to the final form of the contract, for example by raising their hands.

It is also important to take the pupils' age into account. Older pupils in secondary schools may be better able to understand abstract rules, whereas for younger pupils, rules based on examples will work better.

TIPS FOR INTRODUCING THE CONTRACT

1. When should the contract be introduced?

→ The contract should be introduced at the start of the lesson.

→ It can be introduced in detail during a lesson on the Holocaust

→ It is possible to create a general contract covering all lessons and introduce it at the start of the term or school year

2. What should you say to the pupils at the start?

→ You should openly state that you are introducing the contract and explain what it is.

→ For example: “We will be following a contract in today’s lesson. I would like to present it to you and ask if you have anything to add. It is a set of rules, and I am introducing it so that we are all clear about what we will be doing.”

3. How can you make sure the students have understood the contract?

→ One option is to ask the students for their opinion directly. If the students do not respond, you can ask them to raise their hands to indicate that they have understood the contract.

→ You could also ask the students additional questions, such as: “Which rule do you think should be the most important?” “Should any of these rules be worded differently?”



4. How do you ensure the contract is followed?

→ When someone breaks the agreement, remind them that the class agreed on the contract at the start of the lesson. It is worth pointing out the specific rule that has been broken.

→ If a particular class consistently refuses to adhere to the contract, it is worth setting out clear consequences for breaking it. The consequences should directly relate to the pupils’ behaviour.

Proposed contract for primary and secondary school pupils



For elementary schools	For secondary schools
Our lessons focus on the history of the Holocaust*	Our classes focus on the history of the Holocaust*
We talk about real people who once lived and their stories	We talk about real people, their experiences, and historical events
We explain our opinions and verify where our information comes from	We distinguish facts from opinions, and base our statements on evidence
We ask questions when we don't understand something and want to learn more	We ask questions out of curiosity respect, or genuine ignorance
We treat everyone with respect, regardless of appearance, background, or suffering	We use neutral language grounded in respect
We remember that our situation is different from that of people who lived in the past	We exercise caution with historical comparisons and avoid drawing parallels between historical events and the present

* In the case of a general contract, the first point may be omitted or replaced with the statement "our lessons are about history".

Taking pupils’ age and sensitivity into account in teaching practice

Teaching about difficult history involves engaging with emotionally demanding content. An excess of distressing stimuli can lead to overload. The risk is greater when the content exceeds pupils’ current cognitive, empathic or moral capacities.

According to some psychologists (such as Lawrence Kohlberg or Martin Hoffman), individuals gradually acquire the ability to understand others’ perspectives, assess moral situations and respond to the suffering of others through cognitive and empathic development.

For this reason, it is advisable to introduce difficult content relating to the Holocaust step by step.

Younger students in particular find it easier to understand history through the lens of individual stories. A starting point could be a photograph, a letter, an excerpt from a diary, a short biography or the story of a single family. Such material helps pupils see that history concerned specific people, their lives, relationships, emotions and everyday existence. After working with an individual story, it is then worth introducing pupils to a broader historical context, for example by comparing the individual’s fate to the average situation of a member of that person’s national, ethnic or religious group.

Assuming the pupils are of a suitable age, the next step is to move on to more complex historical and social mechanisms. Teenage pupils can analyse dehumanisation, propaganda, contempt, poverty and institutional violence as broader mechanisms that shaped the lives of entire groups.

Gradual introduction of difficult content using the Holocaust as an example



Step	What do we do?	Example
1. We start with an individual and describe their experience	We present an individual's story. We discuss what that person might have gone through.	We start with a photograph, a letter, a biography, an excerpt from a diary, or the memoirs of a Holocaust survivor. We describe the individual's difficult experiences.
2. We present the individual's context	We explain the circumstances that person faced.	The ghetto, the occupation, prohibitions, coercion, lack of safety.
3. We connect the individual's story with the group's story	We show that many people of that ethnicity had similar experiences.	The individual's fate as a starting point for a discussion about the Jewish community.
4. We analyze the mechanisms	We move on to the more complex mechanisms that shaped the lives of entire	Dehumanization, propaganda, contempt, exclusion, violence, collaboration.

Graduating knowledge

the individual → context units → context groups → general mechanism

LET'S START WITH THE PERSON

Lessons based on the story of Hédi Fried can begin by showing one of the photographs. It is worth introducing the pupils to the basic biographical details:

→ What is the name of the person we will be focusing on today? Where and when was she born?

Hédi Fried was born in Syhot in 1924 in Transylvania.

→ Did she have any siblings? Did her family belong to a particular faith or were they part of an ethnic minority?

Hédi had a younger sister, Livi. Hédi came from a Jewish family.

WE PRESENT THE INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

It is worth beginning the individual context with the personal story of the person being described. An example of such a story is Hédi's recollection of a school visit to the post office:

> Six schoolgirls went to the post office with their art teacher. I was excited and a bit nervous. Firstly, I was going to meet my beloved; secondly, I was going to learn Morse code, something I'd long dreamed of. The post office manager welcomed us, gave a formal greeting, and explained the uncertain political situation and the important role of the post office. "Everything that happens here is confidential." He looked around. "I assume you're all Romanian?" The teacher looked at me and replied in an uncertain voice: "Nooo, not all of us." Then the director put down the piece of paper he was holding and said: "In that case, we must stop." We were sent home.

Next, it is worth asking the pupils a few questions:

→ What was the purpose of Hédi's visit to the post office?

The protagonist went to the post office with her art teacher and school friends to learn Morse code.

→ What emotions did Hédi feel?

The protagonist felt both joy and tension.

→ What question caused the school visit to the post office to be interrupted?

The visit was interrupted after the question of whether all the pupils were Romanian.

LINKING THE CONTEXT OF THE TEXT TO THE GROUP'S HISTORY

It is worth providing pupils with the historical context of the protagonist's experience. Following the annexation of Northern Transylvania to Hungary in September 1940, some of the Nuremberg Laws were introduced. Jews were dismissed from public office, the work of doctors and lawyers was restricted, non-Jews were forbidden from buying from Jews, and schools and universities were closed to Jewish children. In 1944, Hédi and her family were forced to move to the ghetto in Syhot. Later, the Jews from the town were deported to Auschwitz. Hédi describes how over three thousand Jews were deported from Syhot.

After presenting the basic facts about the group's life, it is worth ensuring that pupils understand the key terms and know the significance of the most important places. Pupils should, for example, know what the Nuremberg Laws, a ghetto, deportation and Auschwitz were.

ANALYSING THE MECHANISMS

Having presented the group's situation, the next stage involves explaining the abstract mechanisms that determined its functioning. Using Hédi's story as an example, one can explain to students the significance of dehumanisation in the spread of anti-Semitism:

> Anti-Semitism permeated every sphere of life: film, art, literature and science. Prejudices were cemented; every German growing up knew that Jews were not human and had to be exterminated. Jews were vermin that had to be eradicated, tumours on the country's healthy body, and a tumour must be cut out.

→ Nazi propaganda portrayed Jews as non-human. What examples of non-human terms used to describe Jews can be found in the text?

The text contains terms such as 'tumour' and 'pest'.

→ What emotions are such terms intended to evoke? What do they bring to mind?

Such terms can provoke a reaction of disgust or aversion. They are associated, for example, with disease.

→ Why call someone in a way that evokes such associations and emotions?

THE ROLE OF FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE IN PROTECTING PUPILS' MENTAL WELL-BEING

According to Hanneke Bartelds, empathy-based history education should aim to provide pupils with reliable factual knowledge.

To avoid information overload, as well as cognitive errors such as historicism (applying contemporary standards to judge the past), empathy-based education requires an understanding of the context, causes, limitations and circumstances of historical figures. Pupils should know who the people in question were, where they lived, the circumstances they found themselves in, and the historical processes that influenced their situation. Factual information serves an organising function, enabling pupils to better understand what happened, why it happened, and what decisions people made under specific circumstances.

An excessive focus on the suffering of victims can be emotionally overwhelming for pupils. It can also hinder the acquisition of knowledge. A pupil experiencing intense anxiety, fear or overwhelm may focus primarily on their own discomfort. In such a situation, it is more difficult for them to analyse sources, understand historical mechanisms and adopt another person's perspective.

Issue	Significance for education on difficult history
The role of difficult emotions	Engaging with difficult emotions can foster the development of empathy. Students recognise different emotional states and gain a better understanding of other people's experiences.
The risk of overprotection	Overprotection from difficult content may limit pupils' understanding of emotions.
The risk of overload	An excess of difficult content can lead to overload. The pupil may then focus mainly on their own discomfort rather than on the other person's situation.
The importance of social skills	The development of empathy and social skills supports peer relationships, self-esteem and a child's social functioning.

Regular reference to factual information whilst gradually introducing difficult content



To encourage pupils to engage cognitively with the knowledge being conveyed to them, it is worth ensuring appropriate **references to facts** at every stage of the knowledge progression.

Suggested question for pupils:	Role
What do we know for certain about this person?	Distinguishes facts from speculation. The question can be asked as early as when introducing a specific story.
Where does this information come from?	Teaches how to work with sources. The question can be asked as early as when introducing the individual story.
When and where did this happen?	It places the story in a basic and emotionally neutral context.
What factors influenced this person's life and choices?	It prevents us from judging victims from today's perspective. It is worth asking this question after providing a broader contextualisation of the individual's experiences.
What does this person's story tell us about broader historical processes?	It links the biography to a broader historical context. It is worth asking this question after providing a broader contextualisation of the individual's experiences.
What is worth remembering as a fact, and what was our emotional reaction?	It clearly distinguishes between the cognitive and emotional reception of history. The question can be asked at any stage of the knowledge progression.

Dehumanisation can take many different forms. How should we respond to it?

→ Dehumanisation refers to a way of thinking and speaking that strips people of their full humanity.

→ Its aim is to increase distance from a particular group or person and to weaken the sense of responsibility for how they are treated.

→ When people are portrayed as a mass, animals or objects, it becomes easier to justify violence, exclusion or indifference towards them.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF DEHUMANISATION

Dehumanisation can take various forms; it involves referring to people solely as numbers, comparing them to animals, or describing them as objects, a labour force or a biological threat. Each of these forms works differently, but ultimately leads to a weakening of empathy and makes it easier to suspend moral standards towards the dehumanised group.

In the context of the Holocaust, dehumanisation was a mechanism of Nazi propaganda, which portrayed Jews as an alien, threatening and subhuman group. The language of propaganda distanced the perpetrators and witnesses of violence from the victims' suffering by denying that the victims were human beings with names, families, feelings, needs and their own stories.

It is worth noting that dehumanisation also appears in jokes, memes, insults and 'off-the-cuff' comments. Statements comparing people to 'vermin' or a 'plague' may seem to students like a humorous exaggeration. Such language, however, has a long history as a tool of dehumanisation.



Suggested ways of responding to various forms of dehumanisation



During lessons on the Holocaust, it is worth teaching students to recognise the mechanisms of dehumanisation. This helps them to better understand the language of historical propaganda and to respond to contemporary forms of contempt.

Type of dehumanisation and characteristics	Example in the context of the Holocaust	How to respond
Deindividuation portraying a group of people as an anonymous mass	Talking about people as transports, numbers, a crowd	Restoring perspective individual. Introduction of names, biographies, photographs, letters, accounts or diary extracts
Animalisation comparison of people to animals or attributing animal traits animal	Using terms such as ‘vermin’; referring to human body parts by names (e.g. paws instead of hands)	Depicting a reductionist characteristic of such thinking; reflection on the role of animalisation in the process of dehumanisation
Mechanisation describing people as objects, tools or components of a system	Referring to victims as cargo, material, labour or a problem to be solved	Highlighting the reductionist nature of such thinking; Reflection on the role of mechanisation in the process of dehumanisation
Biologisation reducing people to biological issues, ancestry or blood,	Talking about Jews as a race or a biological threat	Explaining the role of pseudoscience and racism in Nazi ideology. Demonstrating the reductionist nature of such thinking; reflecting on the issue eugenics

References

Bartelds, H., Savenije, G., van Drie, J., Huijgen, T., van Boxtel, C. (2025). Advancing the teaching of historical empathy in a professional learning community. Learning in Context, 2(1-2), Article 100005.

Fried, H. (2025). Was I Afraid of Death? Questions about the Holocaust (J. Czechowska, Trans.). KARTA Centre Foundation.

Gibbs, J. C. (1991). Toward an integration of Kohlberg's and Hoffman's moral development theories. Human Development, 34(2), 88-104.

Haslam, N. (2006). Dehumanisation: An integrative review. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10(3), 252–264.

Haslam, S. A., Oakes, P. J., Turner, J. C., & McGarty, C. (1996). Social identity, self-categorisation, and the perceived homogeneity of ingroups and outgroups: The interaction between social motivation and cognition. In R. M. Sorrentino & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), Handbook of motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behaviour (Vol. 3, 182–222). Guilford Press.

Szafrańska, K. (2016). Fostering empathy and moral feelings in pre-school children using drama methods. Primary Education in Theory and Practice, 11.

Valtorta, R. R., Baldissarri, C., Volpato, C. (2024). Investigating the link between biological dehumanisation and indirect aggression. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 34(1), Article e2761.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. The views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.