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Institutul Intercultural Timisoara

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# Table of Contents

# 1 Introduction

Facts not Fiction aims to equip young people across Europe with the tools and knowledge to engage with the history of the Holocaust and Nazi persecution actively and critically through the lens of a historian. The project aims to expand the role of young people as public historians who will take the lead in promoting public understanding of historical legacies that shape current-day forms of discrimination. Students embraced methodologies of place-based learning, which emphasise the connection between the learning process and students' physical location, in addition to the project's guiding principle of peer learning, based on collaboration between participating teams. These learner-centred methodologies are guided by trained teachers to encourage student engagement with local Holocaust history, the teaching and learning of which is a crucial opportunity to inspire critical thinking and societal awareness in students (IHRA, 2025).

The research conducted within the Facts not Fiction project examines the impact of introducing the educational approaches of place-based learning and peer-based learning to Holocaust education, thereby aiming to tackle rising antisemitism across Europe. Given the novelty of these approaches, the research conducted during the project aims to bridge a gap between the bodies of literature on Holocaust education, place-based learning, and peer learning. In this review, we will establish the state of Holocaust education and place-based learning in Europe, before considering how the two can be combined in place-based Holocaust learning. The merits of peer-based learning will be further assessed to consider the methodology's incorporation into Holocaust education. In the second part, we will delve into the educational systems of each country where the Facts not Fiction project was conducted: Serbia, Finland, Germany and Romania. An overview of the current state of History/Holocaust education in those countries will help contextualise the findings of this report.

## 1.1 Holocaust education

Holocaust education - the teaching of the systematic persecution and murder of six million Jews and other victims by the Nazi regime during the Second World War - is identified within recent research as an opportunity to inspire critical thinking and social awareness (IHRA, 2025). The *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance recommendations for teaching and learning about the Holocaust* (IHRA, 2025) state that teaching should indicate that the Holocaust was not an inevitable series of events; teachers should discern the various social, political and economic factors that resulted in the disintegration of democratic values and human rights – presenting the Holocaust as a process that could have perhaps been stopped, rather than spontaneous or inevitable events (IHRA, 2025). Such teaching highlights the agency and responsibility of individuals who made decisions.

Whilst Holocaust education has traditionally emphasised its uniqueness, researchers are beginning to suggest the value in considering the lessons the Holocaust can teach for

the future. Nestian-Sandu (2022) argues that an interdisciplinary human rights lens serves exactly this purpose, providing a more comprehensive way of understanding the past in connection with the present. Interdisciplinary approaches to Holocaust education are key to equipping students with the knowledge to address present-day social injustice (Nestian-Sandu, 2022). For instance, an interdisciplinary approach that combines Holocaust education with a human rights lens emphasises the 20th-century gradual violation of democratic and human rights, raising students' awareness of the need to act in a present-day climate of human rights violations. Interdisciplinary methodology raises students' critical thinking by shifting the historical narrative away from nationalist perspectives. Nestian-Sandu's (2022) research further supports the view that when done intentionally, carefully, and in a contextualised manner, comparisons can enable a deeper understanding of the history of the Holocaust and principles of human rights.

Social and national context should also be considered when delivering Holocaust education, particularly for a transnational project like Facts not Fiction. Significantly, social context is particularly liable to limiting the success of teaching antisemitism (Rajal, 2023). Antisemitism tends to be more widely addressed in the classrooms of occupied countries or those of the former German Reich, whilst countries that were part of the Allied forces in which the Holocaust had no direct impact are more likely to neglect antisemitism in their curricula, resulting in the de-Judaisation of the Holocaust. The same study also showed that national curricula in which Holocaust education is not mandatory and ascribed to certain age groups can be an opportunity to teach younger students about the Holocaust, and to bring teaching outside the classroom, such as through state-sponsored remembrance events (Rajal, 2023). While running the risk of negating certain lessons, it provides an opportunity for motivated teachers to engage in place-based learning beyond the classroom.

Whilst the dissemination of accurate information is crucial to Holocaust education, researchers discern the value of emotion when teaching about the Holocaust (Nestian-Sandu, 2022; Berg & Stolare, 2024). Access to facts obtained through primary sources is vital, yet a diverse source base including literature, art and film is necessary to remind students of the Holocaust's human dimension. Without such holistic sources, Holocaust victims are no longer presented as whole individuals. Pedagogical processes therefore need to balance cognitive, factual elements with emotional ones (Nestian-Sandu, 2022). As such, witness testimony is included in the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Recommendations* (2019). History can be individualised by translating statistics into personal stories, whilst references to 'the six million' can dehumanise individuals into a faceless mass. Personalization is not only a prerequisite for empathy with victims, but crucially also provides a counterpoint to the dehumanisation that took place during the Holocaust (Rajal, 2023).

## 1.2 Place-based learning

Place-based learning is a pedagogical practice that takes learning outside of the traditional classroom setting, connecting learning processes with the physical place in which students are located. Place-based learning often occurs in students' own communities, and most authors agree that this practice connects schools and students to their local communities. Powers (2004) finds that these programs foster collaboration between schools and community partners, which exposes students to a variety of viewpoints and provides access to additional resources, facilities, and financial support. Bartley-Carter's (2024) students were able to engage in local history by discovering stories about their community they had never heard before. In creating opportunities for students to participate in their community, place-based learning fosters civic engagement (McInerney et al., 2011). Furthermore, Beames and Ross (2010) argue that after experiencing place-based learning in a school or extracurricular setting, students become more likely to engage in place-based learning within the community on their own time.

Going beyond the community, Beames and Ross (2010) also find that through place-based learning, students use the local to better understand the global. Though Yemini et al. (2023) find that some critiques of place-based learning argue that a hyper-local focus can create a disconnect from global issues, the literature shows that it can allow students to position themselves within global ecological and social systems (Coulter, 2020). Moreover, the critical lens through which students are encouraged to analyse places allows them to evaluate aspects of their communities and environment which are potentially problematic (Beames & Ross, 2010; McInerney et al., 2011). Place-based learning can therefore broaden students' perspectives as well as encourage them to think critically about the world around them.

Many studies reinforce Gruenewald's (2003) argument against classroom-based research that focuses on student achievement and takes for granted standards-based measures of performance. As illustrated, the impacts of place-based learning have focused on community and civic engagement and critical thinking. Coulter (2020) specifically examines youth agency, arguing that students must develop an "ecologically responsive moral imagination" to understand the historical, ecological, and sociopolitical forces that shaped the current conditions of a place. The author further suggests that place-based learning should first focus on answering questions about the history of the land, setting students up for a historically informed and thoughtful engagement with the question of what the land should become. Going beyond the traditional classroom dynamic, Coulter calls for a place-based learning strategy that fosters youth agency by making decision-making a collaborative process with teachers.

Though the benefits of place-based learning are well documented, most studies look at programs that are carried out by external actors rather than the state. Authors largely attribute this to increasingly stringent state-mandated learning standards which leave little time for learning beyond the classroom (Yemini et al., 2023). Thus, the reality seems to be that there has been very limited introduction of place-based learning methods into

traditional classrooms. Further, most place-based learning programs are focused on environmental studies and science, limiting our understanding of their impact on history education (Yemini et al., 2023). Ultimately, however, place-based learning has repeatedly been found to benefit students academically and create ties to their communities, suggesting that it is worthwhile to expand and research its use in a variety of subject areas and settings.

## 1.3 Place-based Holocaust learning

In this section we will explore how place-based learning has been used to more effectively teach students about the Holocaust. Richardson (2019) examined student responses to place-based Holocaust learning by reflecting on student emotions as well as how students' connections to and positions within the Holocaust site shaped their understanding of it. They found that experience of being physically in Auschwitz allowed for students' greater critical reflection and a lasting emotional impact. The author notes the importance of stressing to students that they are visiting the site not as it was then but as it is now, challenging them to think critically about issues of memory in a contemporary space (Richardson, 2019).

Emotion emerges as a central concern in place-based Holocaust learning (Berg & Stolare, 2022). Whilst Berg and Stolare (2022) acknowledge that earlier teaching methodologies have raised concerns about the extent to which emotional experiences accompanying site visits may hinder students' learning, they emphasise the importance of providing open narratives during school trips in order to generate multiple points of entry. These enable students to form connections with the past and gain deeper historical insight. Emotional reactions, which are frequently prioritised in museum research, should not overshadow contextual and cognitive dimensions; rather, place-based learning at Holocaust sites encourages different forms of historical experience—cognitive, affective, and physical—that work in tandem. Furthermore, research into students' responses to place-based Holocaust education at former concentration camp sites identified physical responses that led to psychological and emotional interpretations (Berg & Stolare, 2022). These simultaneous, multilayered experiences resulted in students expressing a 'meta-perspective' in their learning reflections, in which they reported learning more from a Holocaust site visit than they would have from a history textbook. Emotional experiences shaped this 'meta-perspective', leading students to express a desire to share their experiences with others and to act upon their newfound knowledge in a morally colored and future-oriented way. Research into place-based Holocaust education therefore reinforces Nestian-Sandu's (2022) view that democratic competencies must be experienced rather than taught: social change occurs when students become active subjects and experience shifts in their own worldview. The physical and emotional responses elicited by visits to concentration camp sites thus demonstrate the need to incorporate place-based learning into Holocaust education if students are to become active citizens and critically question their own worldview.

## 1.4 Peer learning

Peer learning is another pedagogical practice that has been researched at length and which we will be examined in this report. It refers to learning processes which take place through peer interactions, such as discussions between students in a classroom. Peer learning can be used in the collaborative decision-making process between students and teachers. In one study, a teacher provides their students with materials that they turn into a lesson for the rest of the class (Assinder, 1991). In doing so, the teacher gives students the freedom to determine how the material can best be used for their own learning. Specifically, the teacher divides students into groups, which then must work together to create a lesson to present to the rest of the class, combining peer learning and peer tutoring methodologies. Through this method, among other things, there is increased student motivation and participation, more in-depth discussions and greater understanding and students taking greater responsibility for their learning. Furthermore, because of the more limited time spent on planning lessons, the teacher was able to devote more time to observing and addressing students' individual weaknesses, providing them with specific feedback and making the course more tailored to them. This finding is supported by Damon (1984), which argues that peer learning can allow teachers more time to focus on individual students.

These positive outcomes, particularly students managing their own learning and developing a deeper understanding of the material, are consistent with findings across the literature (Allen, 1976; Damon, 1984; Boud, 2001). Damon finds that in peer tutoring, both the tutor and the tutee see improvements in their verbal and quantitative skills. The author further argues that peer learning allows students to coordinate perspectives and ideas and is most effective when students with different cognitive strategies work together. Boud (2001) finds that as a result of peer learning, students are better able to articulate their knowledge and skills. Ultimately, research shows that children's cognitive performance is better when they engage in group work rather than work alone (Damon, 1984).

The impacts of peer learning are not just academic. The literature shows that this strategy fosters greater social adjustment, self-esteem and positive attitudes towards school (Damon, 1984). Students' personal and social development greatly benefits, as does their confidence and respect for each other (Allen, 1976; Assinder, 1991). Peer learning also provides students with the opportunity to develop skills that are useful beyond school, such as learning how to work with others and have discussions with people who think differently or disagree with them (Boud, 2001). Peer learning is therefore beneficial not just for improving academic performance, but also for students' personal growth.

Peer learning is also present among teachers and is one of the stated impacts of the Facts not Fiction project. A study found that teachers' performance is affected by the quality of their peers, suggesting that teachers learn from each other (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). Further, the study found that improvement in the quality of a teachers' peers is associated with an improvement in student math and reading scores. The impacts of these "knowledge spillovers" are strongest among teachers with less

experience and those who are certified and have regular licensure (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). The literature therefore reveals that students are positively impacted by peer learning both among themselves and among their teachers. Ultimately, peer learning has been found to produce both academic and social benefits for students that engage in it, while also allowing them to be active participants in their own learning. Combined with place-based learning, it has the potential to create a dynamic and collaborative learning environment for students.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Current approaches towards Holocaust education in Europe frequently seek to emphasise the agency of individuals in enabling past atrocities (IHRA, 2025), demonstrating the increasing use of Holocaust education as holding teachable lessons with present-day impact and echoes, rather than as a stand-alone and decontextualised historical event. As research into Holocaust education discerns, interdisciplinary teaching methodology equips students with the critical thinking skills necessary to challenge 21st-century inequalities and should form a central part of teaching and learning about the Holocaust (Nestian-Sandu, 2022). Place-based learning fosters civic engagement and is an effective tool for connecting students with their communities and providing them with access to resources beyond the classroom (Powers, 2004; Bartley-Carter, 2024). This method also allows students to better make connections between the local and the global, encouraging them to think critically about their immediate environment and the wider world around them (Coulter, 2020). Though its impacts have mostly been studied through the lens of environmental education, place-based learning shows great potential for other topic areas. Place-based Holocaust learning involving school trips to former concentration camp sites further emerges from recent research as a powerful teaching methodology to enable students to experience emotional reactions that provide a much deeper understanding of the Holocaust and can prompt them to undertake social change (Berg & Stolare, 2024). Finally, peer learning is a commonly used pedagogical practice that can benefit both students and teachers. It has been found to encourage student participation in class, promote better understanding of the material and free up teachers' time to dedicate more attention to individual students (Assinder, 1991). Further, students see improvements in their social development, self-esteem and attitudes toward school (Damon, 1984).

# 2 Country profiles

To help the reader contextualise the findings of this report, this section will provide background information on the educational systems of the four countries under examination: Serbia, Finland, Germany and Romania. Specifically, this section will describe how the educational system of each country is structured and the role of Holocaust and history education within each country's curriculum.

## 2.1 Finland

In Finland, all 6-year-old children are required to participate in a free 1-year preschool. Attending school is mandatory from age 7 until age 18. Finland follows a comprehensive educational system that aims to help students become balanced people and develop self-confidence and the ability to be critical thinkers. The basic syllabus of this comprehensive system includes history class, taught from years 4 or 5 to year 8 in one or two 45-minute lessons per week (Rautiainen et al., 2019).

After this, students choose to continue their education at an upper secondary school or a vocational school. The Ministry of Education determines the general aims and issues of education at this level. Students select their own individual courses and complete learning at their own pace if they meet a minimum number of courses. The number of required history courses at this level decreased from four to three in 2015 (Rautiainen et al., 2019). The courses cover three themes: "The human in environmental and societal change", "International relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries", and "History of independent Finland" (Rautiainen et al., 2019). Upper secondary school ends with a standardised examination, in which students can choose to take an extra exam with a focus on history. In vocational school, the curriculum includes social studies (Meri, 2015).

The National Agency for Education's framework allows schools a lot of flexibility in writing their own curricula. Teachers are expected to create personal curricula for students based on their skills and strengths (Meri, 2015). The government's standards for history education emphasize students' ability to "critically evaluate the information and understand the ambiguity and relativity of historical knowledge" (Rautiainen et al., 2019, p. 292). In a survey of history teachers, Rautiainen et al. (2019) found that place-based learning was quite uncommon in Finnish history classrooms.

Since 2010, Finland's history and ethics curricula have included specific references to the Holocaust. In particular, the history curriculum for years 7-9 refers to the teaching of "human rights violations such as genocide, the Holocaust, and persecution of people in different countries" (Carrier et al., 2015). Similar wording is included in the history curriculum for upper secondary school. The wording does not prescribe a direct focus on Holocaust education, but rather the teaching of the Holocaust in a contextualised way (Carrier et al., 2015). Following the 2010 curriculum amendment, history, religion and education teachers received training on the Holocaust. A number of upper secondary

schools also offer special courses on the Holocaust, which include visits to Auschwitz (Finland - IHRA, 2025).

## 2.2 Germany

Since 1995, Holocaust education has been a compulsory subject for all students aged 14-16 in Germany (Sharples, 2015). Compulsory schooling in Germany begins at age 6 and generally consists of nine years of full-time education (Döbert, 2015). Mandates for the German education system are regulated by Germany's federal structure, with the whole school system under federal state control (Döbert, 2015). Districts and municipalities further hold increasingly greater responsibilities for the school system, including planning, equipping and maintaining schools (Döbert, 2015). The *Länder* (federal states) regulate what is learnt, such as through textbook dissemination, standardised examination, and regulating instruction, which covers teaching hours or the number of pupils per class (Döbert, 2015). Vitale and Clothey (2019) note that the German educational system offers substantial autonomy to the sixteen *Länder* in the creation and implementation of their curriculum. As a result, the extent and depth to which Holocaust education is incorporated into classrooms varies significantly between *Länder*, as well as between educational levels (Vitale & Clothey, 2019).

Structurally, the German school system has a relatively unitary primary level before splitting into different parts at the lower and upper secondary levels. This tripartite educational system at the secondary level impacts the depth of Holocaust education received by students, with those at the Gymnasium, the highest academic level, being taught about the Holocaust in greater length and with more detail compared to a more passive remembrance of the Holocaust at the *Hauptschule* or *Realschule* (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). Students who stay on in school to prepare for university further encounter Holocaust as a school subject again when they are 18 (Sharples, 2015). Sharples (2015) notes that since the 1980s, memorial sites (*Gedenkstätten*) have become central to Holocaust education within German schools, thereby demonstrating an emphasis on place-based learning. Students are especially likely to visit a nearby concentration camp site. Holocaust education further takes place across a range of subjects in German schools, including social studies, music, art and biology, as well as history and German studies (Sharples, 2015). Teaching across subjects remains susceptible to the same constraints of school divisions; for instance, students at the *Hauptschule* learning about the Holocaust during a German language class will only read the most basic novels, whilst students at the Gymnasium will have the opportunity to analyse complex texts that offer holistic views of the Holocaust's present-day impact (Vitale & Clothey, 2019).

The family plays a large role as an educational institution in Germany, both in preparing children for school and supporting them throughout their schooling (Döbert, 2015). With Germany's 2015 'open-door' policy, immigration has impacted the demographic of German schools and offers certain challenges to Holocaust education (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). Changing diversity within the classroom makes the cultural contexts of new students an important consideration, as these bring different understandings of

Holocaust facts to the classroom including disinformation (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). Immigrant and refugee children are also most often placed in the lowest educational tracks (Vitale & Clothey, 2019) which, as established, offer a poorer Holocaust and history education. A further challenge to Holocaust education in Germany is the lack of mandated professional development on the topic within schools that can equip teachers with the pedagogical skills necessary to tackle such a complex subject (Vitale & Clothey, 2019). However, teachers do receive training opportunities for Holocaust teaching from state organizations, trade unions, museums and memorial institutions (Sharples, 2015).

## 2.3 Romania

According to the new law on pre-university education 198/2023 compulsory education spans preschool, primary, lower and upper secondary levels and reaches up to 18 years of age. At present, however, only the final year of preschool and the first two years of high-school are implemented as mandatory, but the duration of mandatory education is due to extend to cover all levels progressively.

The first mentions of the Holocaust were made in the History curriculum and textbooks in relation to WWII in the late 1990s. From the 1960s until 2004, the overall consensus, both among historians and in the political and public discourse was that there was no Holocaust in Romania and that only the Nazis are responsible for crimes committed against Jewish people. The persecutions and genocide of the Roma were also completely ignored. A radical switch was generated in 2004 with the publication of the Report of the International on the Holocaust in Romania that clearly documented the responsibilities of Romanian authorities for the killing of over 300000 Jews and the deportation of around 25000 Roma, out of which only around half returned (Yad Vashem - the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, 2004). The report (Yad Vashem - the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, 2004) also recognises the victims of the Nazis and of the Hungarian authorities in the current territory of Romania that was under the control of the Hungarian authorities. These facts started to be reflected in history teaching during the following years and training programmes for history teachers were initiated. However, the quality and impact of these activities remained limited (Misco, 2008). The approach changed starting with 2009, with the introduction of new curricula, that moved the focus from content to the development of competences, while also maintaining a significant thematic context dimension. Thus, in the context of a thematic approach to history teaching, the Holocaust was included as a distinct topic. Considering the resurgence of Holocaust denial and distortion transmitted through social media and especially targeting young people, the Romanian Parliament adopted a law mandating the introduction of compulsory teaching about the history of the Jewish people and about the Holocaust (namely Law 276/25.11.2021). On this basis, a new compulsory subject was introduced in all high-schools for the 11th grade, with one hour per week, starting with the 2023-2024 school year (the curriculum was approved through Educational Ministry Order 5344/2023).

The curriculum (see Ministerul Educației, 2023) includes topics regarding the history of the Jewish people in Romania and their contribution to Romanian culture and society, as well as the Holocaust, with connections to antisemitism. The genocide of the Roma during WWII is also addressed. The subject is envisaged to develop appreciation for

cultural diversity, openness to positive intercultural interactions, a critical understanding of history, as well as the capacity to recognise and reflect on the consequences of stereotypes, prejudices, racism, antisemitism and discrimination, and to promote democratic attitudes and behaviours. Moreover, since 2006, schools are required to organise extracurricular activities to commemorate both the International Day (27 January) and the National Day (9 October) for the Commemoration of the Victims of the Holocaust. Training for teachers on these topics is provided annually by the National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania "Elie Wiesel" (NISHR) and by several NGOs. For over a decade, such courses are also provided by the "Olga Lengyel" Institute (TOLI), in cooperation with the NISHR and with the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara. The Intercultural Institute of Timisoara also provides online courses focusing on the methodology of history teaching, based on the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018). NISHR also provides teachers with a wide range of resources. However, evaluations made by the Ministry of Education and the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara show that there is still a strong need for training and support for teachers.

## 2.4 Serbia

In Serbia, a preschool programme to prepare children for primary school is mandatory for children between the ages of 5.5 and 6.5. Primary education is mandatory and lasts for 8 years, split into class teaching from years 1-4 (lower primary) and subject teaching from years 5-8 (upper primary). The current curricula for primary education were adopted by the National Education Council from 2004-2010 (Spasenovic et al., 2015). Secondary education, for ages 15-19, is not mandatory. About 75% of students attend secondary vocational schools, which reflects the limited capacity of general education schools (Spasenovic et al., 2015).

In lower primary school, history is taught as part of an interdisciplinary course, becoming standalone in the first years of upper primary school. In general secondary school, students select specific strands to follow which focus on different subjects. While all students must take a history course during the first year, the strand they choose determines whether they continue to take compulsory history courses or are offered elective multidisciplinary courses (Serbia - OHTE, 2022). Students at vocational schools are also required to take a history course at some point in their programme. History curricula are written by the state with input from minority groups and are mostly organized chronologically with transition towards thematic approach in secondary education in the last several years. Teachers have some flexibility in teaching methods and selecting the specific content to teach (Serbia - OHTE, 2022).

Between 2019-2022, Serbia adopted new teaching programs that include Holocaust education in the eighth year of primary school, fourth year of secondary school, and in secondary vocational schools (Serbia - IHRA, 2025). Topics related to the Holocaust and the Second World War are also covered in civic education, foreign language, geography and other classes (Serbia - IHRA, 2025). This is a significant change from the curriculum

of the early 2000s, which referenced the Holocaust in a very limited and inconsistent way (Byford, 2011). Holocaust education in Serbia has historically been influenced by the Jasenovac Committee of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which tends to promote comparison between the Jewish and Serbian victims of the Second World War, using Holocaust educational models to inform Serbian students about their own ancestors (Byford, 2011). The Committee also runs teacher training programmes.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The Serbian educational system has few required history courses, and students' chosen educational path determines whether they continue to take history courses in the later years of secondary school. However, the curriculum was recently updated to include teaching about the Holocaust in courses other than history, such as civic education and foreign language. Overall, there is now a greater focus on Holocaust education, though influences from the Church may impact the perspective from which the Holocaust is covered. In alignment with its general educational philosophy, Finland's approach to Holocaust education is comprehensive. The Holocaust is taught in a contextualised way and teachers receive training on how to approach the topic, which is included in both the compulsory school years and in upper secondary school. In general, Finnish history education emphasises critical thinking, though the required number of history courses has decreased in recent years. History and Holocaust education in Germany varies according to the country's federal structure, in addition to different educational levels. Given its pertinence within German society, the Holocaust is taught in-depth and across a range of different school subjects. Place-based learning constitutes an important part of Holocaust education in Germany. However, children on less academic educational tracks, which generally include high numbers of children from migrant backgrounds, receive a less holistic teaching of the Holocaust. Emerging from research into Romania's teaching system is the relative novelty of Holocaust education and autonomy of teachers, both of which can provide motivation and scope for teaching sensitive topics whilst also enabling teachers to ignore the topic altogether if wished. Students receive limited History teaching in general, which further impedes the accessibility of Holocaust education. However, the Romanian ministry has shown increasing interest in the matter since the country's measures to align itself with the European Union in the early 2000s.

# 3 Research design

This research project was designed as an evaluation of the main component of the Facts not Fiction project. To best evaluate the success of the project activities, the research team consisted of one country researcher per country and a research coordinator. Each of the country researchers are experienced researchers dealing with research and education in their local context for many years. The findings presented below are obtained through the qualitative study combining interviews with educators and focus groups with students involved in the Facts not Fiction project. The study was conducted between September and December 2025 and included 8 educators (two per country) and 39 students who participated in the project. Interviews and focus groups were conducted live where possible, while the rest was conducted online. Data collection followed the highest ethical standards as well as the child protection policy developed by EuroClio. Since all participants were part of the Facts not Fiction project activities, they were all previously informed about the research and offered the possibility to participate in the interviews and focus groups. Their participation was completely voluntary. Interviews with educators included themes such as the use of place-based, peer learning, and project-based methods, process of learning, the theme of the project, and the main challenges they faced. The students during the focus groups discussed the same elements of the project from their perspective in addition to their sense of ownership of the project. The main findings per country are presented below.

# 4 Findings

## 4.1 Finland

Two teachers participated in the Facts not Fiction project in Finland. One teacher teaches at an upper secondary school. While the other teacher taught in a lower secondary school in the beginning of the project, they transferred to an upper secondary school in the middle of the project. The participating students attended either lower or upper secondary school during the project. As a result, students' age ranged from 14 to 18 years. The teachers coordinated the project together and organised joint activities for all students. The project focused on the eight Jewish refugees that Finland handed over to the Nazis in 1942. All but one perished in the Holocaust. As refugees, they spent only a short period in Finland. As a result, historical records of them are scarce. Students working on the project studied the refugees' life stories as well as the public discussion around their deportation by searching archival records at the National Library and the National Archive. They also attended guest lectures on Holocaust history and visited different historical sites, such as a synagogue in Finland, Klooga concentration camp in Estonia, and Stolpersteine in Helsinki and Turku. The project's end-product is a virtual game, which the students have been developing together. The game allows its user to move virtually to different sites in Helsinki connected with the deportations. Teachers and students were interviewed in September 2025. This analysis is based on two teacher interviews and two focus group interviews. Overall, five students participated in the focus group interviews.

### Teachers

#### *Place-based and project-based teaching*

Both teachers viewed place-based teaching positively. One teacher described how the place-based learning is pedagogically effective particularly when teaching and learning about the Holocaust in Finland:

> *These students were interested in [the topic] for real and also [the project] opened their eyes, because we have had this perception in Finland that we had nothing to do with this [Holocaust] and our wars were separated [from World War Two] (F_T_1)*[1]

As their response shows, place-based learning did not just increase students' interest and engagement in the topic, but also worked efficiently in teaching about Finland's part in the Holocaust, which has been marginalized in dominant historical narratives in Finland. The other teacher also saw that their students were more engaged in learning that took place outside the classroom, making learning more effective. However, they also pointed out some difficulties that the Finnish context created: "What is challenging is that in reality (…) there is really very little information [about the Jewish refugees in Finland] in the archives." (F_T_2). The scarcity of archival records occasionally caused

[1] Throughout the report, in order to keep them anonymous, participants are identified in the following way: **Name of the Country*_*Teacher/Student*_*Number**

frustration among students, particularly when juxtaposed with the abundance of records that can be found in other countries that participated in the project.

Both teachers also viewed project-based learning positively. They agreed motivating students was easy, because they joined the project voluntarily and therefore were genuinely interested in the topic. One teacher mentioned some difficulties in relation to project-based teaching, which mainly stemmed from the practical side of managing a project, such as long days, and coordination with other teachers and school administration when students needed to be absent from regular classes.

### *Process*

As both teachers regarded place-based and project-based learning efficient, they also mentioned that their students learned a variety of new skills and fact-based knowledge about the Holocaust. Considering that the teachers taught students of different ages, their responses also showed that their students learned differently due to their age differences and the extent of their prior studies. The teacher working in the upper secondary school described how their students learned many historical thinking skills, such as source criticism, how historical knowledge is produced, and how historians study the past. However, their knowledge of the Holocaust evolved as well, particularly in terms of understanding the big picture of the phenomenon. On the contrary, the teacher working in a lower secondary school described that their students mostly learned about the content, that is, facts related to World War Two and the Holocaust. This, as they described, is mostly because some of their students had not studied these topics in their regular classes before the project started[2]. As a result, their students needed to study the basics first, whereas students in upper secondary school already had a much stronger knowledge about context. However, younger students also learned many historical thinking skills during their visits to the archives, such as source criticism and understanding how historical knowledge is produced.

### *Theme*

Both teachers regarded teaching about World War Two and the Holocaust very important. One teacher said that as the time passes and the war becomes more distant, the more there is misinformation and misinterpretations about the war and the Holocaust. The fact that there are less people still alive who have living memories about the time makes the teaching of these topics even more important. As they states:

> *There are only a very few people left who have seen these things with their own eyes, and that is why I think it is important to go through [these topics] based on facts. And also, to show where these facts come from [by showing the documents] (F_T_1)*

They also said that it is important to teach about the wrongdoings – including the deportations – particularly when it was not part of the curriculum until recent decades. The other teacher stated that the importance of teaching about World War Two and the Holocaust stems mainly from two reasons. The first one is the fact that there are still

[2] The Finnish history curriculum introduces World War Two and the Holocaust for the first time on grade 8

people who deny the Holocaust, and the second one is that people should learn how such as thing as a genocide can happen in societies where hatred towards a group of people grows uncontrollably. They state: "No matter who is the target, in the 21st century we need even more human rights education when things are only getting worse" (F_T_2).

### *Professional reflection and development*

Both teachers described how the project generated new insights and further strengthened their skills. One teacher noted that they learned new content through guest lectures, which offered new perspectives on the war and the Holocaust. They also explained that project-based teaching further developed their teaching skills, such as time management in learning activities that take place outside the classroom. As student participation was voluntary, they emphasized that a central skill in this project was the ability to motivate students to participate and complete different tasks, especially since they did not receive any points or grades. Despite some challenges related to the contextual constraints of teaching about the Holocaust in Finland, as described above, they enjoyed place-based and project-based teaching and would recommend similar projects to other history teachers.

## Students

### *Process*

Interviewed students also had positive experiences of the project. Even if participating in the project meant additional work and longer school days, all students enjoyed the process and felt that they learned more efficiently than in a regular class. All interviewed students enjoyed working with archival materials. However, they also felt occasionally frustrated due to the lack of proper sources. As one student described:

> *It was quite difficult to find information. There might be a lot of information about one person, but for example our person [that we studied] had only one document, in which it only stated where he was born and in which city he was arrested and which year (F_S_2)*

Students also reported that cooperation with other students and teachers worked very well. Working with peers did not cause any problems, and one student noted that it helped them work more effectively on different tasks. The interviewed students did not report any conflicts between peers or teachers, either at a practical or a substantive level. When asked where and when they felt they learned the most, students mentioned different locations, such as museums and archives. One student explained that listening to a guide deepened their learning beyond what they would have gained otherwise: "It felt that I learned more when I got to visit those places where [the guides] told us things that I would not have found online" (F_S_1). Regarding the highlights of the project, one student pointed to the focus on archival materials and the opportunity to visit different places and meet different people. Another student emphasised the experiences they gained and how they learned through them, noting that they also learned beyond the main topics: "When we looked at the folders [at the archive] I also read about other things that didn't relate to the Holocaust. (…) I learned a lot in those situations." (F_S_4). Older

students in particular described how place-based learning increased their interest in the topic. As one student stated: "I have been able to see familiar surroundings in a different way (…) for example, when we went to see the stolpersteine in Helsinki and we saw the history on the streets. (…) I have learned to view my surroundings from the historical perspective" (F_S_5).

### *Theme*

Most students stated that studying World War Two and the Holocaust is important. One student explained that learning about these topics is crucial for preventing similar events in the future, because otherwise "people forget because they just haven't experienced it personally" (F_S_4). Another student in the same focus group agreed but questioned how effectively different generations have learned: "When we look at the world today where war and genocide still exist, how much have we learned about World War Two?" (F_S_5).

Older students described the topics as emotionally challenging, especially after visiting concentration camps, where the history became more concrete. For younger students, visits to historical sites also evoked emotional responses, but they focused more on learning about the phenomenon in general. When asked how their perceptions of the Holocaust had changed during the project, many students said their understanding had broadened and deepened. One student also described the parallels the project brought to light:

> *When we look at the people who lived during World War Two and the large number of people who did nothing (…) and also today it [the number] is scary, when we for example think about Palestine and so many people and the state (…) are just quiet (F_S_5)*

Some students noted that participating in the project led them to think about history and people in the past differently, not only in relation to the war or the Holocaust. As one student stated: "I think about it [people in the past] differently now than what I did [during previous] history lessons" (F_S_2). In one focus group, students expressed differing views on how people in the past should be judged. One student said they could not understand those responsible for deportations from Finland, while another argued that judging past actions is more complex given what people knew at the time. Another student reflected that the project enabled them to think more critically about the actions of both victims and perpetrators: "If I had been there, would I have done anything better? (…) It was not so easy, and they did not know what was going to happen to them" (F_S_1).

## 4.2 Germany

### *Interview setting*

All interviews with the two participating schools in Bremen and Gelnhausen were conducted in October and November 2025. At the time of data collection, the project had

been completed at both schools; only the dissemination phase of the project was still pending or in preparation, during which the products created were to be made accessible to the broader public. A total of five students and one teacher took part in the interviews in Bremen, while in Gelnhausen four students and one teacher participated. All interviews were conducted online.

### *Process*

Both focus groups described the process throughout the project as instructive and informative, although many of the students pointed out that they already possessed substantial prior knowledge about the Holocaust and the Second World War due to their previous history lessons, their own family histories, or personal interest. Students at both schools reported gaining knowledge primarily regarding methodological historical work, which they became familiar with during the research phase and which they sometimes described as a contrast to conventional history lessons. The students' impressions were also shared by the interviewed teachers. Both teachers stated that they had noticed an increase in their students' competencies, particularly regarding methodological skills, i.e., the profound use of sources. In this context, the teacher from Bremen, for example, speaks of the acquisition of "tools" (G_T_2) through the project, which the students could now use (better).

According to both students and teachers, the working process itself was largely coordinated by the teachers or by the project's German partner institution, the Arolsen Archives. First, biographies of Jewish individuals were reviewed; during a subsequent research phase, more information about these individuals was to be gathered through archive files and independent research. The research findings were then transformed into a graphic novel at both schools, which the students regarded as an effective medium for presenting their results. Differences in the project process emerged only in the sense that the students in Gelnhausen and Bremen reported participating in different extracurricular learning opportunities. The students in Gelnhausen explained that they had attended various events, such as theatre performances and readings, while the Bremen focus group referred primarily to a day trip visit to a memorial site and a former train station used during the Nazi era to transport prisoners.

Challenges in the project process identified by the Gelnhausen students included selecting the appropriate biography to investigate and starting the research process itself, during which logistical questions about potential locations for obtaining information had to be clarified alongside methodological questions about how exactly information could be collected and consolidated. The Bremen group similarly reported initial difficulties during the research process, particularly with structuring the provided materials. They also mentioned that contributing to the creation of the graphic novel was not always easy due to the high expectations they set for themselves. As one student noted:

> *It shouldn't just be some boring book with information, but something that really generates understanding (G_S_9)*

Regarding the added value of the project for the school careers of the students, the responses from focus groups and teacher interviews were comparable. In Gelnhausen as well as in Bremen, independent work and inquiry-based learning were described as highly beneficial. Both groups stated that especially the collaborative approach, which required comparing and discussing different research findings, left a very positive overall impression. As one student from Gelnhausen explained:

> *I think it was really great to hold the finished product in our hands […] to see how all the threads came together (G_S_1)*

The teacher from Gelnhausen even described inquiry-based learning as "brilliant" and explained that project-based work was a "great treasure" for history teachers, which should be used much more frequently in everyday teaching (G_T_1).

### *Peer-based learning*

Collaboration among students, and between students and teachers or other project stakeholders, was described by all interviewees as predominantly positive. A student from Gelnhausen referred to the collaboration as "a particularly wonderful experience" (G_S_1), while a student from Bremen characterized the joint work as "much freer and more independent" (G_S_5) than everyday history lessons, and therefore viewed peer-based learning as useful. Students from both groups described the trip to Bratislava for the International Youth Workshop as especially positive; one student noted forming "strong bonds" (G_S_4) with other European students, while another described the meeting as "interesting and cool because you rarely get that kind of experience" (G_S_8). The interviewed teachers echoed these views, reporting no conflicts and, like the students, emphasising the added value of both internal school and European collaboration.

Both focus groups highlighted the equal status of all participating students. While, as in regular lessons, some students took the lead, all students were able to contribute at any time. Neither group reported significant conflicts; instead, collaboration was described as a continuous and constructive exchange. Although selection processes (e.g., choosing biographies) involved negotiation in both schools, these were said to have proceeded quite "harmoniously" (G_S_2) or, as a student from Bremen noted, to have been resolved "each time through discussions" (G_S_6).

Collaboration with teachers was also described as successful. One student explained that cooperation took place "more at eye level than usual […] in class" (G_S_4), while another referred to the exchange as "good collaboration" (G_S_6). This sense of equality was reflected in decision-making processes: although teachers and the Arolsen Archives provided initial guidelines, students at both schools felt consistently involved. Neither group expressed a desire for greater decision-making power; instead, they emphasised the freedom they had throughout the process and again noted that they were treated as equals in decision-making and coordination.

### *Ownership*

While the answers from both focus groups were similar regarding peer-based learning, differences emerged in relation to the topic of ownership. The students in Gelnhausen stated that the final product, a graphic novel, was a collaborative creation involving many people. As one student summarised:

> *I think we are all authors of the product, we as the project group. The teachers who were involved, the Arolsen Archives who supported us, and of course Hannah Brinkmann, who ultimately created the graphic novel (G_S_3)*

Another student added that Lotte Sontheimer, the person whose biography the students in Gelnhausen had examined, should also be considered a co-author, reinforcing the group's view that the final product was a collaborative result involving many contributors. Among the Bremen students, there was less agreement about who should be regarded as the author of the final product. One student argued that "none of us would have been able to create a graphic novel without the help of an expert" (G_S_9), suggesting that the designer should be considered the author. Another student contended that the students themselves should be seen as the "main authors" (G_S_5) because they had done the preliminary research. A shared authorship was not addressed to the same extent in Bremen as it was in Gelnhausen.

### *Place-based learning*

Place-based learning was described as a valuable experience at both schools. As mentioned above, excursions to extracurricular learning sites were evaluated positively. Students at both schools found the learning processes connected to their hometowns interesting and noted that they had gained new knowledge. All students from Gelnhausen stated that they had learned things about their city that they had not been aware of before. One student described a changed understanding of how they engage with their city's history, tying it to the local Stolpersteine[3]:

> *When you walk past Stolpersteine in our town now, you look at them differently. […] Now you might stop sometimes and take a closer look (G_S_3)*

Another student explained that the project helped him understand that "history also happens on a small scale" (G_S_1), meaning within one's own region, while such stories—or similar ones—often do not appear in textbooks. In Bremen, students particularly noted acquiring new knowledge about death marches and the role the city played in establishing satellite camps of a concentration camp in Hamburg. Several students spoke of a newfound awareness of local history in relation to the Nazi era. One student added that "many people were not aware of how close" (G_S_9) the events of the Nazi era were to their own home. The teacher from Bremen argues similarly, noting that their students learned "a great deal […] about the occupation period and the crimes of the

[3] Stolpersteine are small memorial plaques laid in the ground in memory of Jewish people who were murdered during the Holocaust.

Nazis" as a result of the project, as the topic became "much, much closer" to them due to the place-based learning approach (G_T_2).

***Theme***

The project's topic was considered extremely important at both schools. Many interviewed students emphasised that engaging with the Second World War and the Holocaust remains essential, as the war was "if not the most formative, then one of the most formative moments in our history" (G_S_2). Especially considering current developments, such as the conflict between Palestine and Israel, it is crucial to engage with the Holocaust in the present to raise awareness and counter a potential "blurring" (G_S_1) between criticism of political actors and antisemitic statements. A student from Bremen noted:

> *Especially given our current political situation in Germany, it's important to draw attention to this topic so that right-wing populist parties don't gain even more attention and so people understand this once happened and it can happen again (G_S_8)*

The interviewed teachers largely echoed the assessment of the students, arguing that teaching about the Holocaust and the Second World War needs to be understood as a staple of German history lessons due to its importance to comprehend ongoing political developments. The teacher from Gelnhausen specified that studying the Holocaust would allow students to "derive strategies for action" (G_E_1) that can be used to ensure that events such as the Holocaust or the Second World War never happen again. Students also stressed the importance of informing the public about the Second World War and the Holocaust. By making information available, as intended in the project, they believed one could help ensure that "people learn from history" (G_S_3). Learning about the Second World War and the Holocaust was described as emotional and at times shocking, but also necessary to ensure that engaging with the crimes of that era retains its "deterrent effect" (G_S_1). One of the interviewed teachers added that informing the public about the crimes of the past would also help strengthen the "social cohesion" (G_T_1).

## 4.3 Romania

The Facts not Fiction project took place in several schools in Romania out of which two high schools - a sports high school and a technical high school - were included in this analysis. The two teachers each led a group of students from their respective high-schools and engaged them in place based and project-based learning activities. Each group had a large pallet of activities. In both cases, a wide area of activities moved historical learning experiences beyond the classroom. For one group (group 2), this included research at the county library, visits to the Holocaust Museum in Cluj, film screenings (like Schindler's List), meetings with representatives from the Jewish and Roma communities, and guided tours of cultural heritage sites in Timișoara and Arad. For the other group (group 1), the project activities involved visiting museums, exhibitions,

synagogues, a television broadcaster, going on guided tours and city walks and working directly with primary sources guided by an invited researcher. Students were engaged in learning about the Holocaust and World War II and were expected to later produce student-led outputs of the project, in the forms of interactive maps, videos of guided tours, exhibitions of drawings, banners and posters or other similar products. This phase had not been concluded at the moment of the interviews. However, some of the participants had presented their ongoing work at a workshop in Bratislava where they met other young people from the project. The history teachers participating in the project were interviewed and the young people (6 in one case and 7 in the other case) were interviewed through focus groups. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent from legal guardians and assent from (under-aged) participants. Descript and Microsoft Word Transcribe Program for Romanian were used to transcribe the interviews. MAXQDA coding software, including the AI assist function, was used to code and in part analyze the data.

### *Place-based learning*

Place-based learning was understood as direct immersion into specific sites that were historically relevant in terms of understanding local histories of the Holocaust both in Romania and across the border, in Hungary, as well as deportations of Roma people from the Banat region in Romania. These visits involved rediscovering places that students passed every day or were familiar with, as well as places that they had never been to before (like Cluj and Szeged) and that were relevant to understanding the regional history of the Holocaust and the Second World War. One of the teachers emphasised that this type of activities that allow visiting places and take place outside of the classroom are undervalued in education in Romania and that this would be an important aspect to change.

### *Teachers' perspectives on place-based learning*

Both teachers considered place-based learning to be crucial for the project's overall success and illustrated how this context provided invaluable experiences to the young people that they could not have had otherwise. From one of the teacher's (R_T_1) perspectives, place based learning had 'the most important' role in the project's success, as it enabled the students to become more engaged and further their understanding. Thus, abstract historical notions, such as the Holocaust become tangible experiences:

> *The visits were essential. Students saw synagogues, exhibitions dedicated to the Holocaust, the 'stumbling stones' in the city. They worked with historical documents, learned to search for information in old newspapers. All of this made the project more concrete and more relevant (R_T_1)*

From the perspective of the second teacher (R_T_2), place-based learning enabled the students to experience learning contexts that they would not have otherwise experienced:

> *They hadn't been to Cluj, for example. For them, the fact that I took them to Cluj was extraordinary. They hadn't been to the Holocaust Museum. They wouldn't have gone otherwise, nor would they have thought of going. So it was something completely different in their lives. […] When we were at the Holocaust Museum in Cluj, they saw several videos with great emotional impact, which I believe fixed their knowledge related to the Holocaust differently, hearing the testimonies of survivors from that period (R_T_2)*

From this quotation we can also see that this new experience was associated with an emotional impact that was enabled by the fact that young people were available to assimilate and emphasize with the survivors' testimonies as they were presented in the museum. In another context, they also underlined that the 'pedagogy of place' is connected by the ways in which young people are enabled to listen to experts explain to them in a manner that is understandable to them. However, it is important to note two critical aspects. Firstly, places in themselves as part of place-based learning appear as enablers to the learning process in terms of creating a motivating, experientially new context in which new knowledge is assimilated and empathy as well as other values are solidified. From the perspectives of teachers, it is rather clear that young people are more open to understanding painful and disturbing historical facts and becoming more aware of past human rights violations by visiting places connected to the Holocaust. Secondly, in discussing the impact of places on young people's learning experiences teachers still almost exclusively attribute agency to themselves: e.g. 'I brought them there' etc. This aspect serves to re-entrench certain power hierarchies as it is unchallenged by both students and teachers alike, as we will see in a moment. However, at least one of the teachers saw their role as primarily one of being a facilitator, yet this was also seen in connection to creating a context in which students could learn not directly from them in the form of a classic lecture, but from other experts and survivors as authoritative voices speaking about the past.

### *Students' perspectives on place-based learning*

Students also found that place-based learning was very significant to their experiences. Through visiting locations related to the Holocaust and World War II made the learning experience more impactful and easier to understand compared to traditional ways of engaging with history (such as lectures or reading about history):

> *Well, it was easier to understand because we saw them. You see that thing in front of you when someone explains it to you, it's more interesting for someone to explain it to you like that than theoretically. Or than for you to read it, it's... Yes, and when you read it, you understand it one way, and you understand it differently somehow when someone explains it to you (R_FG2)*

Engaging with the difficult topics related to the Holocaust in the context of being in places related to the Holocaust, also increased young people's awareness and the emotional impact of the entire process, causing young people to even relate to the historic events they were learning about as traumatic:

> *When we were at this place and when we were in the moment, because then they explained to us what happened and not to forget this thing with the Holocaust. Because it is not something to forget. Because what happened then was really very traumatizing (R_FG2)*

For the students this also meant that they had an opportunity to re-evaluate the ways in which they related to their local surroundings:

> *[interviewer] Can you tell me how you felt learning about events that took place close to where you live?*
> *[Participant] Yes, yes. I knew when this happened, really. I didn't know at the moment that it happened so close. For example, whenever I went downtown, I wondered about some buildings, why they are still standing and why they are not being renovated, or... Yes. Or why it's not just said what is being done. Historical monuments that remain there for those who know them (R_FG2)*

This was even more significant when participants became aware of local deportations of Roma people from villages that were very close to places with which participants were very familiar without knowing anything about the violent aspects of the history:

> *I remember it was said that Roma were deported from a village very close to me, and it stuck with me ever since. (...) For me, when I heard it. I remember even now, two ladies came and presented here, on this screen, and they said something like 30, and I don't want to believe it was 33 or 36 Roma deported from a village near and it's right next to me. And I went a little, fascinated, and asked if it was the same village. I thought, maybe there's another place with the same name, because yes, and I was like that. This topic made me think a little, and that's why I was even more interested in this subject. (R_FG1)*

Similar ways of finding new relationships with familiar places in relation to violent histories also emerged in relation to neighborhoods where students lived (e.g. when they lived close to the Jewish cemetery). This enabled them to situate their lived reality very differently in time by reinscribing familiar places with historical meaning and this motivated them to relate to historical processes more proactively, also enabling them to be more present in observing their surroundings:

> *I think in a way we connected with the city, having more work and about more buildings. For example, at one point we were shown something about banks and certain signs. And, in a way, after that learned desire, I started to notice some details. (R_FG1)*

This also meant that the particular experience of going on transformative journeys to commemorative locations and historical sites was of paramount importance to the students, making them describe their experience as being fortunate that they had been chosen to be part of such a project:

*Experience matters a lot because you will never learn as many things in class as you learn when you visit a monument. It's an experience that not many have, not many schools. It's not to be missed. We are lucky that the teacher chose us. To go on all these trips. (R_FG2)*

### *Project-based methods*

Both teachers and young people considered project-based methods to have an effective and lasting effect on students' learning as opposed to more traditional classroom bound methods. This was seen as especially true for those students who had voluntarily decided to engage in the project activities. Few activities took place during class time but in this case too, participation was voluntary. However, agency remained in the perspective of both teachers and students, with the teachers. Students did not perceive that the process was guided by their interests and horizons but were at the same time very happy and engaged in the process. This opens up an important dilemma in relation to how to best conduct project-based learning in contexts of Holocaust education and historical education more broadly. As a several step process it is recommended to more thoroughly engage teachers in training about how to create space for young participants to articulate their own interests and confidently and in a distributed manner lead the process of knowledge generation. In this way, young people could in a follow-up project be rendered responsible for generating locally relevant knowledge about the Holocaust in a more agentic way. This would involve an introductory training for both teachers (as facilitators and not exclusive legitimate knowledge agents) and young people (about their possibilities of knowledge generation). Ideally such a training would involve young people who have successfully participated in such projects as peer trainers to model successful engagement generation from a similar positionality as that of prospective participants. A similar approach could be taken for teachers by inviting other teachers who successfully acted as facilitators of knowledge generation processes with young people to act as trainers for the participating teachers at the onset of the project.

### *Project based methods from the perspective of teachers*

Both teachers agreed that project-based methods sustained the engagement of the students in the learning process, since they foster meaningful engagement on the students' own terms. One teacher (R_T_2) considered that project-based methods led to a deeper understanding and long-term learning that is difficult (if not impossible) to achieve in class. This was especially true for students who are not particularly academically motivated, due to having other priorities in life such as being athletes and investing their time in sports. Both teachers agreed that project-based methods made it possible to more easily adapt to students' needs, interests and capabilities. Thus, also designing tasks and modes of interacting that kept them engaged and motivated in learning. However, an important point to keep in mind is that teachers defined project-based learning as being involved with this project, including visits and other activities and more rarely through direct involvement in concretely contributing in carrying out a project of their own and working towards completing this project - as such it would be more appropriate to speak of learning as part of a European project, than of project based learning. Project-based learning would have involved the young people

going through specific stages of a project, completing it and having agency over the process and its results, this form of learning did not appear to happen in this context.

This is connected to the fact that both students and teachers agreed that teachers had the large share of agency over the process, but that this was perceived as both legitimate and desirable by the young people. However, what they perceived as project-based methods, enabled teachers to practice student-centered teaching and learning and not curriculum or teacher focused teaching and learning, as one of the teachers explained:

> *I think this was my most important role, to think and design activities for which they have availability, understanding, capacity for understanding that would somehow attract them, and another very important role is to maintain their interest throughout this long time. (R_T_2)*

Student centered teaching and learning was reciprocated with engagement on the side of the students. From the perspective of one of the teachers (R_T_1), an essential part of the development was related to fostering research skills and critical thinking, since students learned the difference between primary and secondary historical sources and learned the 'joy of research', which also means that they developed a positive affective relationship with their abilities, identity and activity as historical researchers. Moreover, the teacher explicitly linked project-based methods to the development of collaborative skills and work ethics, as students were "forced [by the context] to prepare seriously and collaborate" (R_T_1). This was done by starting from the competences and inclinations that each student had and could further develop as part of the project, such as drawing, filming, graphic design and research. This development also led to a more positive relationship with these skills, for example students could discover the joy of research. Beyond the technical skills that young people developed, the project also enhanced their empathy and civic spirit, learning to build a responsible relationship with the past. Moreover, the project was seen by the teachers as enhancing students' self-esteem and self-confidence.

### *Project based methods from the perspective of students*

In some instances, the place-based nature of the learning experience made it difficult for students to distinguish between the project and the visits, which also means that place-based learning and learning within the project were often considered to be synonymous by the young people. This may also have been the case since at the time of interviewing (June 2025), the young people had not yet finalized the outputs of their projects (such as guided tours, films etc.) and very few had been involved in presenting their work in an international context. What was understood as essential by them was the direct experience with specific contexts of historical importance that helped develop their horizon related to historic understanding, this was shared by young people in both schools:

*[participant] And I've been involved in this project since the (new) teacher came to school. And she told us what was going to happen in the project and I found it interesting. And I've been in all the projects so far.*

*[Interviewer] In all the projects, meaning in all the visits for one project or multiple projects?*

*[participant] In all of them. I've been in all of them, yes. (R_FG2)*

*It is much easier when someone explains to you what is there or what happened and... Or when you see... You are more interested at the moment, because you are in front of that thing and you see that someone explains it to you. And sometimes you are even amazed by what happened or what is there. If it were in class, you wouldn't be very amazed, because you don't know what it is, you don't know all the terms. (R_FG_1)*

Active engagement in a place-based setting made it easier for young people to engage authentically and openly with knowledge without feeling the pressure of academic language and by being enabled to relate experientially to the reality of historic knowledge. This experience-based approach also made it relevant for the young people in terms of motivating them to continue to become engaged in similar learning contexts in the future:

*I liked it. I liked all these experiences through which I learned and understood many things about this, as well as antisemitism, about the Holocaust and so on, and they grounded me, and if there's another chance and I fit, I'll do it again. (R_FG2)*

Moreover, interactive and practical methods were key to keeping the young people engaged throughout the learning process which they contrasted with classroom learning pointing to the experienced superiority of these methods in keeping their interest in content and subject matter alive, feeling as a more natural process by which new knowledge is incorporated:

*If it [school subjects] were taught interactively, I personally assume we would find them much more interesting in that class or in history. As usual, we don't do anything to know if something is interactive. It seems we are all drawn to pay attention in an active class, to participate with pleasure, to learn something new, fresh. That's it. (R_FG1)*

Young people felt drawn to the subject of Holocaust and to understanding not only the violence that was entailed in the Holocaust, but also the ways in which resistance operated against this violence, thus contributing to historical empathy and to civic education:

*Well, the things that were treated at that time really attracted me, honestly, a lot. How many of them were killed at that time just because they were Jews. I also saw that many were brought in by having some jobs so as not to be killed and deported to Auschwitz. And, that's what marked me. (R_FG2)*

From a pedagogical standpoint, it is important to remark that some of the young people did not feel that they were the ones working in this project, they transferred ownership of this work to the teacher. They saw the role of the teacher as that of someone who had made this possible through their work.

> *And how would you describe your work in this project? If you worked on something, if so, I'll tell you. Exactly, it matters. Mhm. Yes. And a lot of involvement in helping later. Most of the work was done by the teacher, because she organized all the trips and did everything and so on so that we can come... (R_FG2)*

On the contrary, some young people (albeit from the other group), saw the hands-on and creative engagement as one of the key aspects that they had enjoyed the most about their experience:

> *I can say that you want to remind them that these are interactive projects. Which are generated projects where you learn something, you go, you present it, and then you interact with people, you cooperate, you do all sorts of things. Look, for example, I liked that we also made posters, not just wrote (R_FG1)*

And similarly, another participant from the same group elaborated on this question:

> *I was really fascinated by this, that it allowed each of us to make a poster or a banner after a certain book or to draw. Everyone contributed their imagination. Probably this fascinates us more and makes us get more involved than a simple lesson or just transcribing something, writing. (R_FG1)*

On a different note, from the standpoint of students that had been engaged in the project, one of the main challenges was time management in relation to contributing to active involvement in tasks so this might point to the need to think of comprehensive programs by which engagement of young people as researchers and producers of knowledge is made possible:

> *The most difficult part might also be time. We didn't have enough time for everything we had to do to complete the projects, we don't [usually] have much time. Because we are young athletes, it's hard. [. . .] I was given very little time to learn what to say. And maybe that's why the video didn't turn out very well. (R_FG2)*

### *Young people's peer learning*

Young people saw peer learning as an integral part of their journey together in this project, which fostered unity in the form of community and mutual support beyond the shared learning process. However, they rarely if at all explicitly referred to what they had learned from each other but described how they learned things about one another or explored new things together, collaborated or needed to agree on certain aspects. For

one group of young people, this involved the explicit collaboration in learning and skills sharing: "If someone had an idea, we would learn it and we would all put it in the same pot." (R_FG2) or put differently, "we reached a common denominator" (R_FG1). Moreover, it also involved how communication and social relations within the group evolved over time:

> *[We] understood each other better now. Well, we also communicated. We asked to see each other. Before, we didn't communicate much. Before, no, but now... and we shared and we loved each other. We shared and we shared, as a class. (R_FG2)*

Furthermore, the group emphasised their equal involvement and shared experiences. When asked about their contribution, they responded, "Equally, all equally" (R_FG2). This suggests a sense of collective responsibility and an absence of hierarchical structures in their learning process, at least among peers (not in relation to the teacher). Another participant added, "We had, in fact, the same experiences", reinforcing the idea that they navigated the project together, learning and experiencing things in a similar manner. Even when they explored different parts of a city, they would "talk among ourselves about what was in the other part of the city" (R_FG2), demonstrating a proactive approach to sharing and consolidating their individual discoveries. The social aspect of peer learning was also mentioned, with a student recalling "And the moments we live there, we still laugh among ourselves, we even laugh on the bus, and we meet people from schools and we all start talking" (R_FG2). This illustrates that learning extended beyond formal tasks, creating a supportive and enjoyable atmosphere that facilitated informal learning and bonding, but that it remained a shared experience rather than an opportunity to view each other as important sources of knowledge and competency that could be shared and built upon within the group.

### *Teachers' professional reflection and development*

Teachers also felt that the process was very enriching for them, showing also how being exposed to and needing to interact with various institutions, experts, museums librarians and representatives of Roma and Jewish communities was also seen as enriching, as well as the *modus operandi* that they acquired in terms of knowledge production through research skills development alongside the students:

> *I also learned, alongside them, what it means to work with primary sources. For example, we discovered historical documents together with an invited researcher. It was an experience that opened our eyes to the importance of direct research. (R_T_2)*

Moreover, R_T_2 feels that the project gave them an opportunity to learn about how to adapt complex activities for the interest and knowledge levels, as well as capabilities of their students – figuring out constantly what could contribute to the project's success. The fact that their students were not academically motivated, made them constantly search for other means by which they could engage them and thus learned to design activities that were engaging for them and motivating them in their role as a teacher. Yet also more basic skills such as confidently communicating in English, doing projects that require online work, as well as being more self-confident were developed as part of this

project by their colleague, the other teacher involved in the project (R_T_1). Moreover, one of the teachers felt that they had developed pedagogical competences about how to integrate various media (photographs, documents representing primary sources etc.) into their regular classes. Moreover, they felt that their engagement with their own work improved, as did their abilities to network with people from other cultures and be open to and curious about different cultural standpoints. Finally, to make the project work they had to mobilise various resources, including colleagues, community members and experts – and thus also learned how to work with others and as part of teams to produce learning. Thus, they remained engaged in an ongoing process of integrating new knowledge into their general teaching practice.

### *Challenges as perceived by teachers*

Both teachers found it challenging to confront student prejudice, particularly regarding sensitive issues. Though not widespread, these instances were notably intense. While one of the teachers noted that generational differences made youth better situated to deal with sensitive issues, this was still perceived as a challenge that could be addressed through training at the onset of future projects. Furthermore, establishing a network of experts presented logistical and organizational hurdles. Because this was addressed by traveling to external experts, the place-based dimension of the learning process may have been diverted. Furthermore, both teachers faced challenges in actively involving students but for reasons that they interpreted differently. For one of the teachers (R_T_2) the main challenge of this process was engaging those who are not 'studious' or academically motivated. They consider that these challenges were successfully addressed. Finally, the fact that there is little space for experiential learning in regular day to day classroom activity was an important point in relation to the otherwise overcrowded curriculum. For the other teacher (R_T_1), the main challenge was finding students willing to participate, as many students in their school were commuters, so could with great difficulty find the time to participate. Another challenge was enabling students to integrate knowledge about the Holocaust with other forms of knowledge.

## 4.4 Serbia

### *Introduction: Participants and context*

This report is based on two teacher interviews and two student focus groups carried out in Serbia within the Facts not Fiction project. Both teachers are experienced secondary-school teachers from Belgrade gymnasia, with many years of teaching sociology, philosophy and related subjects. They also have previous experience with projects and international cooperation, so they did not enter this project "from scratch", but with existing know-how about project work and Holocaust education. One teacher summarises: "I've been in education since the mid-90s, mostly in gymnasia; this is not my first project, nor my first time working on Nazism and the Holocaust" (S_T_1). The student groups came from two general education gymnasia in Belgrade. One focus group was made up of 6 fourth-grade students from the 14th Gymnasium, the other of 6 third-grade

students from the Third Belgrade Gymnasium. In both cases, participation was voluntary: teachers presented the project to their classes, students signed up, and over time a smaller core group remained involved.

## Teacher interviews

### *Use of place-based and project-based methods*

Both teachers very clearly describe Facts not Fiction as project work that is at the same time strongly place-based. They see it as an opportunity to "do a real project" around the Second World War and the Holocaust, rather than just adding one more lesson or activity to the existing curriculum. As one of them puts it:

> *It wasn't one extra class, it was a whole process – with a beginning, middle and a product at the end. (S_T_2)*

In practice, this meant that key steps of project pedagogy were present: they started from a perceived need (gaps in students' knowledge about Nazism and the Holocaust), organised a full training day, planned concrete outputs (a podcast, school presentations, work with micro-histories), and then guided students through different phases of research. One teacher explains that they first ran a focus group with students "to confirm that there really is a need to work on these contents and that they want to master them in a different way" (S_T_1). Place-based elements are very visible in their stories. Students did not only hear about events in the classroom: they visited the Memorial Centre at Staro Sajmište, the Historical Archives of Belgrade, the Banjica concentration camp, and walked around the city looking at stumbling stones and locations of destroyed buildings, including the old National Library. As one teacher notes:

> *We moved out of the classroom – we were going around the city, to Sajmište, to Banjica, to the archive… they kept saying: 'We had no idea this was here. We weren't learning in the classroom. We weren't in the classroom at all, and that mattered. (S_T_2).*

A key didactic choice was to work with micro-histories related to former pupils of their gymnasia and, in one case, with women connected to the school. Names on memorial plaques in the school corridors became starting points. Together with students, teachers tried to trace these people through archival records, monographs and other sources. One teacher describes this process:

> *It is like being a detective – you start from just a few letters on a plaque, and from those letters you build a new life, you reconstruct it. (S_T_1).*

Project-based work was also visible in how they approached sources. During a training day, students worked with different types of materials about the bombing of Belgrade: a feature film, an AI-generated text, a textbook passage and archival documents. They were then asked to discuss which sources they would trust more, and why. According to one teacher,

> *The idea was to make them aware that not everything that looks polished is reliable… and that sometimes the most 'boring' document is, actually, the most important source. (S_T_1)*

Finally, the choice of a podcast as a main product came after some negotiation. Teachers admit they guided the students a bit: "We already had an exhibition and a walking tour, so we nudged them towards the podcast, because for us that was a challenge too" (S_T_1). At the same time, they emphasize that the decision was made through discussion with the group: "You're there as a coordinator – you suggest, but in the end, it still needs to feel like their decision" (S_T_1). One teacher describes this as a long process of working through questions and drafts with students:

> *First questions, then reformulations, then agreements… so that in the podcast everything sounds spontaneous. In the end, none of the questions were read as we had written them, but as their own paraphrases that still captured the essence of what we had been doing. I was really proud at that point – they carried the substance in their own words. (S_T_2)*

### *Process*

In both teacher interviews, the story of the process starts long before the students enter the picture. Teachers first heard about the project through their networks and previous cooperation with NGOs and institutes. The original idea was to work with a pair of teachers from the same school, but colleagues (especially history teachers) were reluctant to join. One teacher comments: "History teachers are not really ready to participate" (S_T_1). Another adds that collegial cooperation would have helped: "If a history teacher does it in their class, it's different than when you, as a sociology teacher, are the one carrying it all" (S_T_1). Recruitment of students was relatively straightforward. Teachers presented the idea briefly in their classes, opened a Google Classroom and collected names. "There is always some number of students who sign up," one teacher says, "and then it's on a voluntary basis – they continue if it fits them" (S_T_2). In one school, around twenty students initially signed up; over time, a smaller group remained and a core of a few students continued working until the very end. Those whose expectations did not match the reality (for example, who expected less demanding work) dropped out without tension. Because the project was not part of the regular timetable, most activities were organised "in between" regular lessons: after school, online, or in blocks when they managed to free a day. One teacher notes that they sometimes "caught students on Zoom in the evening, because during the day they had regular classes, extra classes, and everything else" (S_T_1). This was partly a result of the general climate in schools, where project work is often perceived as "extra".

The process itself had several recognisable phases: an initial conversation with students, to see how much they actually know about the Second World War and the Holocaust and whether there is a real interest to learn more and in a different way (S_T_1); a training day with short inputs, discussions about victim groups, work with different types of sources and an online meeting with a Holocaust survivor, described by a teacher as "a

conversation that stayed with them – they kept recalling it months later" (S_T_2); place-based activities (visits and walking around the city); archival work and construction of biographical sketches; and preparation and recording of a podcast and a movie with a guest expert.

Although these phases were foreseen at the project level, teachers in Serbia had to adapt the exact rhythm because of strikes, blockades and other interruptions in the school year. "The European calendar says: by this date you should finish phase one," one teacher recalls, "and we had barely started, because there were strikes, then blockades… the school year was constantly being cut up" (S_T_1).

### *Challenges*

Teachers mention several types of challenges. On the systemic level, they point to a gap between how curricula are written and what actually happens in classrooms. Official documents in Serbia, at least on paper, support outcome-based and project-based learning. Yet, as one teacher notes, "many colleagues still teach in an old-fashioned way… they write project work into their plans, but it never really happens" (S_T_1). This creates a situation where projects like Facts not Fiction depend on a small number of motivated teachers and on students' free time. "In the end, it's carried by goodwill," they say, "you as a sociology teacher are leading something, and others don't interfere too much" (S_T_1). The second type of challenge has to do with timing and coordination. The project came at a moment when schools were going through strikes and when student blockades were starting to appear. This meant that planned activities had to be moved, compressed or combined with other obligations. One teacher describes the feeling of "constantly catching up" with deadlines that do not take into account local disruptions (S_T_2). A third challenge relates to logistics and access to sources. Both teachers and students describe the archives as spaces where one rarely finds everything at once. Teachers recall that "you go, they give you part of what you asked for, then they tell you to come tomorrow, and then again the next day" (S_T_1). Old school structures (for example, eight-year gymnasium before the reform) also made it difficult to follow individual students over time. There is also the emotional dimension. Working on the Holocaust and local suffering is demanding. One teacher says: "We . . . our voices tremble and maybe we even shed a tear" (S_T_2). At the same time, they note that students, although affected, were not overwhelmed: "They did not have those flood-like reactions; it was more of a serious sadness and reflection" (S_T_2). Finally, teachers explicitly stated that students who wanted to participate in the project are already "more empathetic, more critically oriented and more democratic" (S_T_2). So, one of the challenges is to broaden the reach of the project. Only ambitious and better students wanted to participate in this project.

### *Professional reflection and development*

Both teachers see this project as meaningful for their own professional development. Even though they had previous experience in similar topics, they stress that they still learned a lot, especially from the moment when research and school activities had to be turned into a coherent podcast for a broader audience. They stated that digital

competencies were something that they internalised and understood better. One of them says:

> *Packaging the research and pedagogical process into that podcast format was the most challenging and, at the same time, the most interesting part. (S_T_2)*

They also reflect on their role in the school. On one hand, they are part of a small group of teachers who continuously bring external projects into the gymnasium. On the other, they are aware that without some form of institutional support, such projects remain isolated and depend on personal energy. As one teacher puts it, "you can't rely only on the enthusiasm of a few people forever" (S_T_1). An important aspect of their reflection concerns students. Teachers notice growth in students' cooperation, persistence and confidence in dealing with sources. "They had to juggle several roles – researcher, presenter, organiser," one teacher notes, "and you could see those skills slowly building up" (S_T_2). Some of the students already came with strong civic and empathetic orientations, but the project gave them a chance to put these dispositions into practice. "These are mostly tolerant kids to begin with," a teacher says, "but once they enter the story more deeply, it becomes even clearer to them why this matters" (S_T_2).

## Student focus groups

### *Process: Peer-based, ownership, place-based*

Students in both schools first heard about the project from their teachers. For some of them, the decision to join was straightforward: they had already taken part in a previous project and had positive experiences, so they simply said "yes" again. One student explains: "Last time I hesitated because I didn't know what it was about, and it turned out great. So, this time I didn't even check what it was, I just signed up" (S_S_2). For others, the decision was more social. In the 14th Gymnasium group, several students frankly say that they joined "because of" a particular classmate. One of them says: "I mainly joined because of my best friend" (S_S_3), while another adds that this same student "recruited half of the project" (S_S_4). In this sense, peer influence and previous trust in the teacher clearly played a role. In the Third Gymnasium group, a student admits: "I joined partly to fix a grade, but it turned out the project wasn't bad at all – it was actually interesting" (S_S_7). When they describe the process, students often contrast the early phase, where they were mostly listeners, with later phase when they felt like co-researchers. At first, they followed guided walks and listened to teachers and external guides. Later, in the workshops, they had to read and interpret sources themselves, present to peers, or search for traces of former pupils in archives. One student describes the turning point:

> *That's when we realized we are a big part of this project, not just sitting there while someone lectures us. We had to research and explain things to others. (S_S_2)*

In terms of place-based elements, students underline the visits to Staro Sajmište and Banjica concentration camps, and other city locations. For many of them, this was the first time they paid real attention to stumbling stones or destroyed buildings in central Belgrade. One student says that taking photographs during visits helped them connect:

> *It's more inspiring when you're in a museum or on the site… you can somehow link it to what happened, and that was my favorite part. (S_S_6)*

Another notes:

> *You suddenly see the city differently – not just as a place where you go out, but as a place where these things actually happened. (S_S_8)*

Students from the Third Gymnasium talked about the very practical side of archival work. Two of them describe how they went to the Historical Archives several days in a row: "We literally went through all the years to find them… we didn't even know there used to be eight grades of gymnasium" (S_S_10). Another adds: "We went three or four days in a row… the hardest part was going all the way there and their organisation, but the biggest satisfaction was when we finally found the material" (S_S_11).

### *Theme: From fragmented knowledge to local stories*

When asked what they knew about the Holocaust and the Second World War before the project, students usually mention basic facts: some dates, names of camps, or "general things everyone knows". One student from the 14th Gymnasium says: "I honestly knew very little, just some general stuff, a film here and there, something I saw on TV… it was all very superficial" (S_S_3). Another adds: "We knew some basic facts, but not much more than that" (S_S_8).

Many of them point out that COVID-19 and later school disruptions strongly affected the parts of the curriculum that deal with the Second World War. One student summarises:

> *In eighth grade we did nothing about the Second World War because of Covid. Now in fourth grade we again skipped a lot because of blockades. So, I basically never had a proper lesson on it. (S_S_3)*

Others confirm similar experiences: "We didn't cover the Second World War at all in primary school… what I knew was mostly from the internet and YouTube" (S_S_5). Because of this, much of their earlier knowledge came from other sources: family stories, popular films such as Dara from Jasenovac, books like The Diary of Anne Frank, YouTube channels, or documentary TV. "Most of what I knew was from films and YouTube, not from school," one student admits (S_S_4).

The project changed not only the quantity but also the quality of their knowledge. Students often say that they moved from "numbers and dates" to "stories". A student who doesn't consider herself a history fan explains how the project finally gave that kind of narrative understanding:

> *I'm not really into history in the sense of data and years and battles . . . I like the backstage stories, things that are not just numbers. (S_S_1)*

They speak about individual people whose biographies they reconstructed: their school grades, interests, political activities, the circumstances of their arrest and their fate. As one student states:

> *When you read about them in the registers, they stop being just names, it hits you that they were people sitting in our classrooms, with marks and absences, and then later they ended up in a camp. (S_S_11)*

Some of these former pupils later became national heroes or have schools named after them; others remained almost invisible in the broader historical narrative. Students also report a change in how they see the city. After the project, central Belgrade is not only a background for commuting to school, but also a network of traces of the war: places of deportation, execution, destruction and resistance. One of them describes walking past a graduation photo in the school corridor: "You realise that in that photo there is someone who later ended up as a victim in Banjica. It's not just 'some old picture' anymore" (S_S_8).

### *Emerging insights specific to the Serbian context*

Several points come out of the Serbian material that may be particularly relevant for the national context. First, there is a repeated feeling of "holes" in formal education about the Holocaust and the Second World War. This is not only about teachers' choices, but also about larger events like the pandemic, strikes and blockades that cut through key school years. As one student says, "it somehow always happened that exactly those topics fell into the gaps" (S_S_5). In that sense, the project sometimes functions as a form of compensation: it fills in a space that should have been covered in regular teaching. Second, there is a clear tension between curricula that officially promote modern approaches and everyday school practice, which remains quite traditional in many places. Teachers who want to work in a project-based and place-based way often end up carrying these activities on top of their standard workload, with little structural support. "You see that on paper everything is progressive," one teacher comments, "but in reality, most people stick to the old patterns" (S_T_1). Third, the parallel presence of student blockades during the project adds a layer that is worth noting. Students who research experiences of persecution, resistance and civic courage in the 1940s are, at the same time, participating in or observing contemporary student protests. This does not automatically mean that they draw direct parallels, but the two experiences clearly coexist and, in some narratives, they touch. Students "felt" that they are a part of history, like their peers from WW2. Finally, the strong role of non-school sources (films, YouTube, social media, AI) in students' understanding of the past stands out. The workshops on evaluating sources in this project can be read as a response to that reality: instead of trying to "ban" such sources, teachers help students think critically about them and place them in a wider hierarchy of reliability. As one teacher summarises, "you can't pretend YouTube doesn't exist – the point is to teach them how to think about what they see there" (S_T_1).

# 5 Conclusion

Overall, the project successfully implemented place-based, peer-based, and project-based methodologies across diverse educational systems. Students and educators across four educational systems evaluated the project as more meaningful, engaging and transformative than standard classroom instruction. Furthermore, the project facilitated deep learning by combining cognitive, emotional, and experiential dimensions of Holocaust education and students acquired transferable skills, including research, collaboration, communication, and creative production. Student motivation was strong when participation was voluntary and linked to meaningful outputs. All educators reported professional growth, particularly in facilitation, adaptability, and reflective pedagogy. However, there were certain aspects that limited the potential impact and quality of the activities. First and foremost, time constraints and curriculum pressures in most cases limited what could be done within the project. It seems that student agency was unevenly realized, so that decision-making power often remained with teachers and the project's impact was strongest where place-based learning could be sustained over time rather than limited to isolated visits.

In all four countries place-based learning emerged as a central driver for student engagement. Students across the project countries saw learning outside of the classroom as more effective and memorable, while the encounters with local sites made the Holocaust more tangible and anchored it in students' everyday environments. Furthermore, they reported developing historical thinking skills, particularly source criticism as well as awareness of how historical knowledge is constructed. They saw peer collaboration as the positive and project-based nature of activities allowed for interdisciplinary connections beyond history as a subject. However, the fact that the project ran in parallel in four different countries with differing educational systems was bound to produce certain variations in implementation. Most importantly, students' prior exposure to Holocaust education varied significantly, with German students generally entering the project with stronger foundational knowledge. Additionally, the access to the historical infrastructure was varied with the project participants in Germany benefiting from dense memorial and archival networks, while Finland faced source scarcity and Romania relied heavily on museums and guided expertise. Place-based learning is also institutionalised to varying levels – while it is more exceptional and teacher-dependent in Romania and Serbia, it is much more embedded in the educational system in Germany. Maybe related is the fact that in Romania and Serbia, teachers were more strongly positioned as organisers and drivers of the learning process, reinforcing traditional authority structures. German students more often framed their learning in relation to national responsibility and contemporary political developments, while Finnish students focused on uncovering marginalised national involvement, and Serbian and Romanian students emphasised discovery of previously unknown local histories. Teacher training and institutional backing for Holocaust education were strongest and most formalised in Germany and Finland, while Romania and Serbia depended more on individual teacher initiative and project-based opportunities. Student reflections on judging historical actors varied by context: German students engaged more explicitly with perpetrator, bystander, and victim perspectives, while Finnish, Romanian, and Serbian students often

approached moral judgment through empathy and personal reflection rather than analytical categorisation.

These findings demonstrate that the project was successful in positioning young people as active learners through place-based and peer learning. Place-based knowledge effectively emphasised the connections between historical knowledge and the lived environments, while peer learning enabled collaborative knowledge production. However, differences between national contexts underscore the importance of situating Holocaust education within specific memory cultures. Findings reinforce the view that Holocaust education gains relevance when linked to present-day social and political challenges while students' reflections demonstrate the project's success in fostering critical awareness of memory, responsibility, and silence.

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