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Participating in professional development programmes or learning in the wild? Understanding the learning ecologies of Holocaust educators

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Abstract

Holocaust education, which refers to the teaching and learning of the Holocaust—the systematic genocide of six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II—is an essential component of history and social studies education in many countries. Its primary aim is to raise awareness of the Holocaust, promote understanding of its historical significance and develop critical thinking and empathy in students. However, despite the increasing specialisation and institutionalisation of Holocaust education, there is still a lack of understanding of how Holocaust educators acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the subject effectively. This study aims to explore the learning ecologies of a group of Italian Holocaust educators, focusing on their motivations for initial and lifelong learning and their learning practices. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers from different subject areas. The results showed that participants were driven by either personal or curricular motivations and interests and used a range of learning approaches for both initial and lifelong learning. Although few participants considered digital technologies and social media as a learning environment, they were found to be useful resources. The study concludes with practical implications for further research.

KEYWORDS
Holocaust education, informal learning, learning ecologies, professional development

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The main issue addressed in the paper is the lack of understanding of how Holocaust educators acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the subject effectively. The study focuses on Italian Holocaust educators and examines their motivations for initial and lifelong learning, as well as their learning practices.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Several key findings emerge from the paper. Firstly, participants in the study were motivated by personal or curricular interests and used different learning approaches for both initial and lifelong learning. Secondly, while digital technologies and social media were not widely perceived as learning environments, they were found to be valuable resources by those who used them.

INTRODUCTION

The transmission of Holocaust memory to the younger generation is a crucial aspect of education, encompassing historical knowledge and the cultivation of values, morals and identity (UNESCO, 2017). As agents of remembrance, teachers and educators have a profound responsibility that goes far beyond the transmission of historical information. They have a crucial role to play in conveying contemporary messages and values to their students and learners, and in fostering a deeper understanding of the significance of the Holocaust in the context of the present (Novis-Deutsch et al., 2023).

In recent decades, extensive research has been conducted in the field of Holocaust education, collecting data from a diverse range of educational settings (Carrier et al., 2015; Eckmann et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2020; Gross & Stevick, 2015; Nesfield, 2015). This area of academic inquiry and educational practice has undergone significant development, emerging as a discipline of global and transcultural significance. Over time, there has been a gradual expansion, professionalisation and institutionalisation within the field, and Holocaust education has been integrated into formal school curricula, teacher training programmes and university education departments (Eckmann et al., 2017).

Due to the diversity of experiences, tracking educational practices in the international context has proven challenging (Eckmann et al., 2017). Holocaust education encompasses a wide range of approaches and programmes aimed at teaching and facilitating learning about the Holocaust in a variety of settings (Carrier et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2017). One of the notable features of the field is the lack of uniformity in national guidelines and regulations, regardless of the main subject area of the teachers dealing with the topic (Eckmann et al., 2017). In some countries, the Holocaust has a prominent place in the national curriculum and

secondary school teachers often participate in comprehensive professional development programmes for the whole teaching staff that focus on Holocaust education (Foster, 2013). In other countries, the recent integration of Holocaust education into the global framework of nations committed to its promotion highlights specific challenges, including a lack of formal professional development programmes for teachers and inconsistency in teachers' pedagogical practices with students (Baer & Sznaider, 2020). These differences have led the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) to publish Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust in 2019 (IHRA, 2019), which aim to provide educators of 45 countries with fact-based and pedagogically sound techniques for teaching the complex and nuanced history of the Holocaust.

However, there is still limited understanding of how teachers acquire holistic knowledge about the Holocaust and become professionally prepared to teach it. This refers to the learning dispositions and processes of individuals and the different factors that contribute to their understanding, such as their relationships, available resources, activities and contextual elements (González-Sanmamed et al., 2019). Examining the most common opportunities and resources for learning, development and achievement is essential to understanding how educators acquire comprehensive knowledge of the Holocaust and develop their learning ecologies (Barron, 2006).

The aim of this study is to examine the learning ecologies (Barron, 2006; Jackson, 2013) of a group of Italian educators teaching about the Holocaust, specifically exploring their use of different media resources such as film, literature and digital media (Neiger et al., 2011; Popescu & Schult, 2015). Given the current significant impact of technology on teaching and learning about the Holocaust, which has led to the digitisation and transculturalisation of Holocaust memory (Kansteiner, 2017) and the emergence of new pedagogical approaches (Walden, 2021), this study also aims to explore educators' attitudes towards digital technologies and social media as learning tools to enhance their understanding of the Holocaust and incorporate it into their teaching with students (Adamson, 2023; Manca, 2021). By focusing on a small-scale case study in the Italian context, where there is currently no comprehensive national professional learning programme for Holocaust educators, we can gain deeper insights into the interaction between formal and informal learning contexts in the professional development of teachers about the Holocaust. This analysis can serve as a model for the study of other geographical contexts facing similar training challenges.

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In contrast to countries that have long had a legal obligation to include Holocaust education in their curricula (Davis & Rubinstein-Avila, 2013; Eckmann et al., 2017; Novis-Deutsch et al., 2023), Italian teachers were not subject to such an obligation until the early 2000s (Santerini, 2003). As a direct result of the new legislation passed by the Italian Parliament (Law 211/2000), the national competition 'I giovani ricordano la Shoah' (Young People Remember the Shoah)[1] was established to promote the study and in-depth analysis of this tragic event and was linked to the establishment of the 'Giorno della Memoria' (Holocaust Remembrance Day).

There are several institutions and organisations dedicated to Holocaust education and remembrance, such as the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) and the Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (CDEC, Centre for Contemporary Jewish Documentation). The Italian Ministry of Education also cooperates with prominent international Holocaust organisations (e.g., Yad Vashem, the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris), which provide valuable support by organising training seminars and study trips for teachers and students to Holocaust memorial sites (Saba, 2012). Some Italian universities support

Holocaust education through master's and postgraduate programmes (University of Roma Tre, University of Florence), while museums and memorial sites play an important role in disseminating knowledge to the wider public.

Despite these collective efforts, challenges remain in the field of education and professional development. Holocaust education can vary between regions and schools due to the autonomy of educational institutions and their proximity to memorial sites. This variation can lead to inconsistencies in the depth and quality of Holocaust education provided. In recent years, significant efforts have been made at the national level to provide resources and guidance to teachers and educators. In January 2018, the Italian delegation to the IHRA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, developed national guidelines entitled 'Linee guida nazionali per una didattica della Shoah a scuola' (National Guidelines for Holocaust Education in Schools), which serve as a comprehensive resource for educators and provide a clear framework for teaching the Holocaust. In January 2022, the Ministry of Education published the 'Linee guida sul contrasto all'antisemitismo nella scuola' (Guidelines for Combating Antisemitism in Schools), prepared by the Joint Committee Ministry of Education—UCEI under the guidance of the National Coordinator for Combating Anti-Semitism.

However, there is still a significant gap in our knowledge of how teachers and educators develop their learning ecologies about the Holocaust and acquire the skills necessary for effective teaching. The aim of this study is to explore the process by which a group of Italian Holocaust educators acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the subject effectively.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED LITERATURE

The learning ecology approach

Similar to other areas of professional development, teacher learning has increasingly emphasised multiple learning contexts and self-directed learning, focusing on topics such as expanded learning contexts and personal learning environments (Attwell, 2007; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Macià & García, 2016). In recent years, research has examined how individuals select, experience, navigate and participate in learning experiences that span multiple contexts, both physical and digital, by conceptualising learning as a complex phenomenon that includes formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Malcolm et al., 2003; Zhou et al., 2022). The ability to identify and create appropriate learning environments is critical to successful lifelong learning, as learning can occur in a variety of formal and informal ways (Dabbagh & Castañeda, 2020; Goodyear, 2021).

The lifelong learning ecology is a complex and multi-layered concept that explores the development of learning resources and the relationship between beliefs and attitudes in different contexts (Sangrà, Raffaghelli & Veletsianos, 2019). The concept applies to all life domains and related beliefs (Jackson, 2013) and has been studied in different educational settings, including primary school teachers (Estévez et al., 2021; Sangrá et al., 2021; Soszyński, 2022), higher education (González-Sanmamed et al., 2020; Peters & Romero, 2019) and learners' use of ICT and social media (Bruguera et al., 2022; Carpenter & Staudt Willet, 2021; van den Beemt & Diepstraaten, 2016).

While different authors have conceptualised the framework in different ways (Sangrà, Raffaghelli & Guitert, 2019), two essential dimensions of a learning ecology are intrinsic 'learning dispositions' and 'learning processes' (González-Sanmamed et al., 2019). The former refers to a person's beliefs, motivations and expectations about learning, while the latter includes relationships, resources, activities and context. As Barron (2006) notes, each

ecology is a unique combination of activities, materials, relationships and interactions that emerge from them.

The specific focus of learning ecology is on learning that takes place outside the classroom or teacher-led instruction. This is particularly relevant in the context of teacher professional development, as it encompasses informal and non-formal learning processes that occur outside of traditional training programmes (Reinders, 2020). According to Hutchins' (1996) book *Cognition in the wild*, informal learning or 'learning in the wild' occurs when questions are asked, answers are given and knowledge is gained at the discretion of the learner and teacher (Haythornthwaite et al., 2018). This study aims to explore Holocaust educators' learning ecologies and learning dispositions, such as interest and motivation, and learning processes, including activities, resources and relationships, as they unfold in different contexts. Specifically, the study aims to explore how educators use professional development programmes and their preference for informal learning processes in 'learning in the wild' learning ecologies.

Learning interests and motivations of Holocaust educators

Teaching about the Holocaust is increasingly seen as linked to the history and society in which it is taught, with factors such as international politics, power relations, religious and ideological perspectives (Gross & Stevick, 2010). As an important means of shaping and transmitting collective memory, Holocaust education in local classrooms is influenced by both national and personal factors (Plessow, 2017). The national element is seen in the curriculum, teacher training and standardised tests, while the personal aspect is brought in by the beliefs and attitudes of students and teachers (Novis-Deutsch et al., 2023). Teachers' personal connections, such as family history, can help students reflect on the human stories and the relevance of the Holocaust today.

These factors, along with educators' personal experiences, can influence their interest, motivation and instructional orientation (Deutsch et al., 2018). For example, many Polish teachers who teach about the Holocaust are motivated by personal responsibility and the need to understand their own history (Gross, 2013). Their teaching aims to address a painful past, fill historical gaps and promote empathy, awareness and appreciation of Jewish contributions to national culture (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs & Büttner, 2014).

In Germany, Holocaust education has traditionally been seen as a national obligation, with students required to learn about the Holocaust because of their parents' and grandparents' involvement in the crimes (Gryglewski, 2010). In Israel, teachers are motivated by a variety of factors, including the atrocities of annihilation, the lives of survivors, the power of the Nazi regime, Jewish resistance, the impact of the Holocaust on Jews and Israel, and broader historical and religious knowledge (Cohen, 2013). Arab teachers in Israel who participate in Holocaust courses may be driven by curiosity, a desire for better understanding, improved relations with Jews and the promotion of good neighbourliness (Shiloah et al., 2003).

Overall, the phenomenon of the globalisation of Holocaust remembrance has also had a significant impact on Holocaust education over the last 30 years, fostering the emergence of a shared European cultural memory centred on teaching values such as empathy, human rights and the rejection of discrimination (Novis-Deutsch et al., 2023). The connection between the Holocaust and human rights, both morally and politically, has extended beyond European states to influence other countries (Harbaugh, 2015; Pellegrino & Parker, 2022).

Resources, activities and relationships of Holocaust educators

Holocaust education varies considerably from country to country. In England, a national study found that the majority of teachers were self-taught and had no formal training in Holocaust education (Foster, 2013). In Israel, on the other hand, a high percentage of teachers had received formal training, with a significant number having completed university-level courses on the Holocaust (Cohen, 2013). In the United States, teacher training had a limited impact on pedagogy, but teachers expressed a strong motivation to learn about Holocaust content and pedagogy (Harbaugh, 2015). In countries where teaching the Holocaust is more controversial, such as Lithuania and Eastern Europe, teachers need additional administrative support to deal with peer pressure (Beresniova, 2015).

Study trips to Holocaust memorial sites, such as former concentration and extermination camps, have become increasingly important in creating high-impact learning experiences (Flennegård & Mattsson, 2021; Saba, 2012). Holocaust museums and memorials play an important role in providing educational opportunities for teacher training, lifelong learning and raising awareness about education and remembrance (Oren & Shani, 2012; Oztig, 2023). In addition, popular media, including films, documentaries and television series, serve as informal platforms for Holocaust education across generations (Ginsberg, 2004; Perra, 2010). Finally, survivors and testimonies are recognised as valuable sources of information for teachers and students. They provide first-hand accounts of historical events, personal experiences and perspectives that can bring history to life in a unique and powerful way (Gross, 2017; Richardson, 2021).

Digital media, including interactive websites, social media, virtual reality applications and computer games, have attracted considerable interest from educators and teachers (Manfra & Stoddard, 2008). Recognising the potential of digital media to engage younger students, they are exploring new forms of digital Holocaust remembrance and education (Walden, 2021). This includes using testimonies (Marcus et al., 2022) and presenting Holocaust survivors in novel ways (Ebbrecht-Hartmann & Divon, 2022; Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022). Projects in the United States and Europe are actively developing various digital Holocaust remembrance initiatives, such as interactive video testimonies, virtual reality films, augmented reality applications, museum installations and online exhibitions (Boswell & Rowland, 2023; Storeide, 2022). These efforts aim to convey the memory of the Holocaust through innovative and immersive approaches.

Finally, there remains a dearth of research that explores the dynamics of how Holocaust educators cultivate connections with their peers and experts. Furthermore, the study of communities of practice within the field of Holocaust education remains underexplored (Kerr-Lapsley, 2023). Predominant scholarly research focuses primarily on the methods by which teachers enhance their relationships with students (Pistone et al., 2023).

Research objectives and questions

A qualitative research methodology using in-depth interviews was deemed appropriate to explore the learning ecologies of educators in relation to the Holocaust. The aim of this exploratory study is to address the following research questions:

1. What motivates and triggers educators' interest in learning about the Holocaust?
2. How do educators shape their learning processes based on the available resources, activities and relationships?
3. How do educators perceive digital resources, especially social media, for professional learning and teaching?

METHODS

Procedure and analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to allow teachers to provide in-depth explanations of their perspectives and learning methods. The interviews were designed to explore the connection between the teachers' personal and professional roles in Holocaust education. The interviews revolved around three main themes:

1. Teachers' approach to learning about the Holocaust, including a preference for self-directed learning or learning activities provided by others.
2. Teachers' preferences in terms of access to resources, primary activities for developing their professional skills and competencies, and how they build relationships with peers and experts.
3. Teachers' use of digital resources and social media for professional learning and teaching, particularly in relation to examples of Holocaust-related content on some selected pages and profiles on Facebook (www.facebook.com/FMSonlus), Instagram (www.instagram.com/fondazionefossoli/) and TikTok (www.tiktok.com/@lilyebert).

The interviews were conducted via Zoom in Italian and lasted between one and two hours. They were recorded in both video and audio formats and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using NVivo software. A member checking system (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) was used to ensure the triangulation and validity of the data. The narratives were analysed according to the principles of consensual qualitative research, an approach to qualitative data analysis that emphasises collaboration, consensus building and rigorous data interpretation (Hill et al., 2005). In consensual qualitative research, the research team undertakes several key tasks, including collecting qualitative data; coding the data to identify recurring themes, patterns and categories within the text; participating in a consensus-building process; organising the themes and categories into broader domains that encompass different aspects of the phenomenon being studied; and reviewing and validating the researchers' interpretations and findings. To ensure confirmability, credibility and consistency (Leung, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in the data analysis, two researchers worked with a smaller sample of data to identify key themes and then coded the educators' responses using pre-existing categories such as motivation and interest in learning dispositions; resources, activities and relationships for the learning process; and attitudes towards digital tools and social media. The coding scheme was developed under three main themes, corresponding to the three research questions presented earlier, using bottom-up observations and theory-based notes (see Table 1 for a list of themes and topics). The two researchers then independently analysed the transcripts according to the above criteria. To ensure inter-rater reliability, Cohen's κ was calculated and showed a high level of agreement between the coders, with $\kappa = 0.83$ (95% CI, $p < 0.0001$). Where there were differences in interpretation, consensus was reached using the consensual qualitative research (CQR) discussion method (Hill et al., 2005). All the names and identifying details of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Participants

Participants were selected using snowball sampling based on four criteria: (a) school level—although the focus was on high school teachers, teachers from primary and middle schools were also invited; (b) teaching experience—both new and experienced teachers were

TABLE 1 The list of themes and topics.

Themes	Topics	Sub-topics	Examples
Learning dispositions	Interest	Childhood trauma	*I have been studying the Holocaust since the age of 12, ever since I had a traumatic encounter with the subject. Like many others, I saw a video on* Mixer *that was a dramatic moment because it was unfiltered. So this adolescent viewing of a video of the* [gas] *chambers, in an educational but not ideal situation, was a complex moment.*
		Direct or indirect family connections	*My interest is linked to my family history, to my father and my uncle. My father told me how they left Florence: they were both wanted men—that's how it happened, he told me, and my uncle confirmed it too—and basically they were victims of denunciation—as you know, there were bounties on their heads.*
		Passion for history	*The interest came precisely from the fact that I have always been passionate about history, since high school when I was a student, so I have always had this interest.*
		Connection to local history	*I am in the province of* […] *and I want to see what happened in the school buildings at the time when the racist laws were promulgated. I want to find out exactly what happened.*
		Interest stemming from academic studies	*I began to study the Holocaust in an interdisciplinary way. I studied languages, but my dissertation was on Anglo-American literature. In my third year I took a course on American Jewish writers. We had American history professors who came to teach us once a week, and we also studied the rules of Jewish life. So, in order to understand better, we delved into many details, always coming back to this theme, including some of the language choices and the setting of the novels and so on. That's where I started.*
		Visiting memorial sites	*There have been very difficult moments from an emotional point of view, for example a visit to Dachau, which particularly affected me. It had such a significant psychological impact on me that I still feel it today.*
	Motivation	As part of the curriculum	*I approached the Holocaust when I started teaching because I found it in history books. Then, in 2000—I started teaching in 2001—there was a day of remembrance, which I really knew nothing about because I had neglected it. So gradually I began to take an interest, also because at some point I asked myself: 'What is this story, where six million people died in this way?'*
		To create social interest and awareness	*So my perspective is always to approach this tragedy, because as a teacher and educator I cannot guarantee 'never again' (because I think the phrase 'never again' is highly hypocritical). However, I can certainly help to ensure that in the future there are more righteous individuals who are able to deal with such a situation in a very different way.*
Learning process	Activities	Self-taught learning	*I learned* [how to teach the Holocaust] *on my own. When I conducted this conference, I did it with my own resources and based on what I had learned.*
		Searching for material on the Internet	*I also work very well on my own, because now you can find everything on Wikipedia. For example, at the moment I am personally researching all the ghettos in Europe.*
		Seeking advice from experts	*So first there was the selection of experts. The choice of experts was crucial for me. As I have a research-oriented approach to my work, I always look for the highest level of expertise on any topic.*
		Learning from peers	*When I started teaching, the experience of colleagues who had taught the subject before me was valuable.*

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Themes	Topics	Sub-topics	Examples
		Attending institutional training courses	*From there, I approached the one-week summer course at Yad Vashem, and that's where I got the idea of delving into a more specific study of the subject, to learn about a topic that I could teach and implement in school.*
		Visits to museums and memorials	*When the Milan Memorial was opened, I read about it in La Stampa. I was probably one of the first teachers to take students there, and since then I have followed the activities of the Memorial.*
	Resources	Books and printed materials	*It was a journey with different stages that led me to read, in particular Anne Frank's diary, as well as other texts in diary form that are suitable for a certain age, although perhaps not for 9 or 10 year olds.*
		Films and documentaries	*I also found the two DVDs from UTET very useful, one on the Nuremberg trials and the other on the Eichmann trial.*
		Websites	*On this subject, the Holocaust, I have used resources such as the website of the Memorial, the website of the Association of Shoah Archives, Yad Vashem, and for the Righteous Among the Nations, Gariwo. I have also consulted the Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah (MEIS).*
		Academic courses	*There is a lot of enthusiasm in new seminars because you can see how historiography has progressed. So you can hear historians discussing the progress of historical research.*
		Local network contacts	*The involvement in the local network was also very important in a second phase, because through the local network I established various connections to the teaching of the Holocaust that were more local. This was particularly useful for my teaching in this context.*
	Relationships	Collaboration/tutoring	*I collaborate with other teachers in the school, for example with special needs teachers or colleagues in the history department. But about 95% of the time, the spark for my work comes from my own autonomy, because that is a characteristic of me, I suppose.*
		Professional networking	*I belong to both formal and informal groups. There are two different elements. The formal groups are the ones that are specifically set up by Foundation […], for example. Then there are other groups that have been formed through connections made during webinars and have now become stable, meaning that we meet every week to discuss educational initiatives and exchange ideas.*
Attitudes to digital resources and social media	Professional learning		*During the COVID-19 pandemic, I attended all the conferences with Holocaust survivors organised by the Museum of Tolerance, creating a personal interaction with them. It was incredibly important for my own development to have this online but very personal interaction, something I had never expected before.*
	Teaching use		*I think it is important to address the use of these tools and to work with students on this, whatever the topic. In general, I think it's something we need to work on because we cannot just criticise social media and then not change our own use of it. I think it is the responsibility of schools to use it responsibly and to teach how to use it responsibly.*

recruited; (c) gender—an equal representation of men and women, although the majority of teachers in the profession are women; (d) subject area—although most teachers were from the humanities, participants from a variety of subject areas were invited. Table 2 provides some general information about the 10 participants, and all names and identifying details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

The participants in the study were 10 teachers who taught about the Holocaust at various grade levels and schools, including five males and five females. On average, they were 51.2 years old (SD = 9.6) and had 20.2 years of teaching experience (SD = 9.0). Of the participants, 50% taught humanities/literature, 20% taught technical/scientific subjects, 20% taught primary subjects and 10% taught ESL.

RESULTS

Interest and motivations of Holocaust educators

With regard to the first component of the learning ecology, educators' initial interest in the Holocaust was influenced by various factors that shaped their learning dispositions. For Leonardo, a transformative encounter with a Holocaust documentary[2] at the age of 12 sparked a deep engagement with the subject. The raw portrayal of historical events left a lasting impression, fostering empathy, curiosity and a desire for further study. Similarly, Alice's fascination with the Holocaust stemmed from her immersion in the writings of authors such as Primo Levi. These influential works provided an insight into the depths of human experience during this dark period. The desire to understand the unimaginable atrocities committed during the Holocaust served as a compelling motivation for these educators, as in the case of Alice:

> *The question, as I saw it, was* […] *to what extent man can reach wickedness and rational insanity. I was always preoccupied with this question, so I had an almost bulimic desire to read even the crudest and most violent books*.

Gabriele's personal family history played a crucial role in his deep commitment to Holocaust education. His father and uncle were tragically denounced and listed for transport to the Fossoli transit camp, which deeply affected Gabriele. This family connection sparked a strong desire to delve into the historical context, to explore and understand the immense significance of the Holocaust and its lasting consequences.

Francesco and Emma's interest in the Holocaust stemmed from their passion for history in high school, which continues to be an important part of their identity. Their commitment to the subject grew stronger after studying history and philosophy at university, deepening their understanding and enthusiasm for exploring its complexity and significance.

For Mattia, his interest in the Holocaust went back to his childhood. At the age of eight, during a family holiday in Austria, he visited the Mauthausen concentration camp. This experience had a profound impact on him, sparking his curiosity and driving him to seek a deeper understanding of the history of the Holocaust. The visit to the camp stirred his young mind and led him to question and explore the events of that dark period.

Participants' reported experiences revealed a variety of reasons for their interest in Holocaust education, often driven by strong emotional connections or intellectual curiosity. Giorgia, Aurora and Lorenzo shared similar explanations for their choices. Giorgia's interest in the Shoah developed when she began her teaching career and encountered the subject in history books. The establishment of Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2000 further aroused her curiosity, although she initially overlooked its significance. Over time, she

TABLE 2 Demographic data of participants.

#	Name	Gender	Age	Educational qualification	Educational experience (years)	Teaching subject	School level
1	Leonardo	M	45	Master's, SPSSE[a]	20	Humanities/literature	High school
2	Francesco	M	46	Master's	17	Humanities/literature	Middle school
3	Sofia	F	58	Master's	40	ESL	High school
4	Aurora	F	50	Master's	22	Humanities/literature	Middle school
5	Alice	F	58	Master's	25	Primary school subjects	Primary school
6	Lorenzo	M	44	Master's	20	Primary school subjects	Primary school
7	Mattia	M	38	Master's	4	Technical/scientific subjects	High school
8	Emma	F	43	Master's, SPSSE[a], PhD	18	Humanities/literature	High school
9	Gabriele	M	65	Master's	15	Technical/scientific subjects	High school
10	Giorgia	F	65	Master's	21	Humanities/literature	High school

[a]School of Postgraduate Studies in Secondary Education.

actively researched and engaged with the topic, deepening her interest in the Holocaust. For Aurora, Holocaust Remembrance Day played a pivotal role in sparking her interest in the Holocaust. Before the day was established, her knowledge and understanding of the subject was limited. However, as the celebration gained recognition, it caught her attention and motivated her to delve deeper into the history and experience of the Holocaust. For Lorenzo, on the other hand, the challenge was

> *… always to look at this tragedy from a different perspective, because I cannot guarantee that 'never again' will never happen (a phrase I find extremely hypocritical). However, I can help to create more just people tomorrow, who might be better equipped to deal with such a situation in the future*.

His motivation was to make a positive impact on his students by shaping their minds and characters. He believed that by fostering a sense of righteousness and morality, he could prepare individuals to confront and deal with similar situations in the future.

For other educators, their journey as Holocaust educators began with a teaching project that grew out of a personal connection. Sofia, for example, was fascinated by the persecution of the Carabinieri[3] during the Holocaust, a topic she encountered during her professional learning and which connected her to her husband, who is a marshal in the Carabinieri. This aspect, which she had not considered before, aroused her curiosity and led her to study the subject in depth.

The 10 educators demonstrated a wide range of motivations and interests in Holocaust education, reflecting a mixture of emotional and cognitive inclinations. Emotional motivations were fuelled by personal experiences, family histories, encounters with survivors and a desire to honour the victims. On the other hand, cognitive motivations were driven by academic curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. These educators recognised the historical significance of the Holocaust and sought to understand its causes, consequences and ethical implications. It is worth noting that these categories were not mutually exclusive, as many educators displayed a combination of emotional and cognitive motivations. This interplay influenced their teaching methods, curriculum design and efforts to cultivate empathy, critical thinking and moral responsibility in their students.

Learning process of Holocaust educators

How to become a Holocaust educator

Regarding the second component of the learning ecology, the analysis of the interviews highlighted that the 10 teachers took different paths to becoming Holocaust educators. Some chose to attend academic and professional development courses, while others preferred self-directed and informal learning methods. Some teachers used a combination of formal and informal approaches, while others moved between the two over time.

Sofia's interest in the Holocaust grew during her interdisciplinary studies, where she explored the connection between American Jewish writers and history. This led her to take a specialised history course on the Holocaust at university. She also participated in a teachers' meeting at an Italian Jewish centre, where she was involved in Shoah-related projects.

Giorgia took a comprehensive approach to Holocaust education, combining formal, non-formal and informal methods. She started with textbooks, magazines and visits to memorials to gain a basic understanding. Understanding the importance of continuing education, she actively pursued Holocaust-related training courses.

Leonardo and Emma initially focused on formal or non-formal education, but later incorporated informal learning approaches. They engaged with experts, read specialist literature, attended training courses and connected with local and external networks to deepen their understanding of the Holocaust. Leonardo emphasised the importance of relying on experts in this learning process:

> *I have been very careful in my choice of experts. Since I tend to approach my work very much like a researcher, I always strive for the highest level of competence in whatever subject I am working on. I looked for foundations that were specifically concerned with the Shoah. I decided to go beyond the local network, which is also in place, in order to gain access to those who, in my opinion, would be able to give a greater scientific dimension to the subject*.

Lorenzo and Mattia, on the other hand, took a different approach, starting with self-directed learning and establishing links with local networks to initiate outreach activities. They then enrolled in institutional training courses and continued their education at university. Mattia's interest in the Holocaust began at a young age, sparked by Anne Frank's diary. He gradually immersed himself in the subject, collecting films and documentaries related to the diary and eventually becoming a public speaker.

Four out of 10 educators prioritised informal or self-directed learning as their main approach. They engaged in a variety of activities, including self-study, watching films, entering competitions, conducting online research, reading books and connecting with local networks. Some educators expressed the limited pedagogical opportunities they initially encountered when addressing the Holocaust in their schools. They highlighted the lack of comprehensive training and the scarcity of easily accessible and up-to-date materials on the Internet at the time. Aurora, for example, recalled the challenges of finding educational resources before the Internet provided an abundance of materials:

> *I don't remember any real training because the Internet didn't offer any of this great up-to-date material. It was your responsibility to attend an event if there was one*.

Like other educators, Francesco discovered that taking advantage of educational opportunities not only engaged students, but also enhanced their own knowledge and connected them to a network of experts. For Francesco, the Young People Remember the Shoah competition played a key role in his professional development. Working with experts enriched Francesco's knowledge and provided him with valuable tools and strategies to effectively engage and educate his students. The combination of personal growth and professional guidance played a crucial role in his continued development as an effective Holocaust educator.

Continuous learning of Holocaust educators

The study participants demonstrated a more consistent approach to lifelong learning compared to their initial steps as Holocaust educators. They used a combination of formal, non-formal and informal learning settings and a variety of tools and resources. These included reading books, attending institutional training programmes, enrolling in academic courses, taking study trips, visiting museums and memorials, and engaging with both experts and non-experts. Many participants recognised the importance of attending courses offered by organisations, institutions and universities as part of their lifelong learning journey. Some

emphasised the importance of incorporating the latest historical research, which was often only accessible through academic institutions, as Mattia explained:

> *There is a lot of enthusiasm in new seminars because you can see how historiography has progressed. So you can hear historians discussing the progress of historical research*.

Educators like Giorgia and Francesco valued the credibility and prestige of institutions that offer Holocaust education courses. Giorgia preferred proposals from respected organisations such as Yad Vashem because of their expertise and deep understanding of the subject. Francesco was more discerning and tended to favour proposals associated with official institutions or recognised expertise. Both preferred reputable institutions to ensure the accuracy and quality of the knowledge they acquired and passed on to their students. Lorenzo and other educators emphasised the importance of obtaining a certificate or diploma as evidence of their commitment to Holocaust education. This formal recognition not only acknowledged their efforts, but also provided external validation of their expertise and competence in the field. Some educators, like Gabriele, placed great emphasis on personal connections and experiences. He enjoyed a seminar in Paris, organised by the Mémorial de la Shoah, which included not only the study history of the Shoah but also seminars and workshop activities. By prioritising personal connections and practical experiences, educators like Gabriele enriched their own learning and created powerful educational experiences for their students. Similarly, educators like Leonardo saw study trips and visits to museums and memorials as essential to the learning process. These study tours and visits were not just optional additions to their teaching methods, but essential components that fostered creativity, provided unique learning experiences and allowed for deeper engagement with the subject matter.

A minority of educators, such as Sofia and Aurora, used a blended approach, combining formal and informal learning methods. By embracing these blended approaches, they enhanced their professional development and enriched their teaching practices by taking advantage of the flexibility and variety of learning opportunities offered by summer schools, online seminars, conferences and museum visits.

Some educators preferred informal learning, which they called ‘learning in the wild’, where they took it upon themselves to find learning resources, mainly through online platforms. Living in a place with limited access to conferences, Alice turned to alternative methods to improve her knowledge and teaching. While this approach offered flexibility and personalisation, Alice recognised the need for a more systematic and structured approach:

> *There is a part of my preparation that is lacking. They are more the result of my reading, of raids on the Internet in search of other teachers' experiences, and probably need to be structured in a more systematic way. They are not driven by systemic preparation, but by my sensibility*.

Some educators, like Emma, broadened their exploration of the Holocaust to include wider angles and issues. When it came to pursuing new learning opportunities, they were chosen with careful consideration:

> *There has to be something very specific that can make me look at it from a perspective I haven't considered before*.

Among the 10 educators, there was an even split between a preference for organised training provided by others and for self-directed learning, with some expressing a preference for a combination of the two approaches. Leonardo preferred others to take control of the learning

situation, but found that such opportunities were rare. Sofia, on the other hand, valued both organised training and self-directed learning. She recognised the importance of filling knowledge gaps through museum visits, audio guides and actively seeking out learning opportunities, taking an autonomous and curiosity-driven approach to her learning ecology.

A minority of participants, approximately 20% of educators, reported active involvement in a specific group or network focused on Holocaust education. This suggests that a significant number of educators may be working individually or within their respective schools, without the support of a larger network. Some expressed feelings of isolation in their work on Holocaust education. They faced challenges in finding a supportive community or network specifically dedicated to this topic. The complex and sensitive nature of Holocaust education, which requires specialised knowledge and pedagogical approaches, may contribute to this sense of isolation.

Use of digital resources and social media

When it comes to educators' use of digital technologies for Holocaust education, most participants declared that they rely on institutional websites, museums and memorials in their own country. Very few used international archives or databases, such as Yad Vashem or the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopaedia. Of the 10 educators surveyed, only two reported using social media platforms, including one who maintained a TikTok channel sharing different views about the Holocaust.

Overall, educators were positive about digital technologies. They appreciated the vast access to resources and expertise available online. For example, Leonardo valued Yad Vashem's expertise in discussing music related to the Holocaust and the Mémorial de la Shoah's multi-faceted approach to studying the Shoah. Social media platforms also enhanced the study of the subject, as mentioned by Leonardo, who engaged with lectures by Holocaust survivors during the Covid pandemic.

While the majority of the interviewed educators did not personally use social media for Holocaust education, they recognised the ability of platforms such as Instagram to present images, spark curiosity, encourage discussion and promote deeper exploration of the subject. Sofia suggested using Instagram to share Holocaust-related images and follow profiles that inspire learning and research. Leonardo considered the possibility of using TikTok in the future, based on his recent encounters with the platform:

> *I recently discussed this issue with a teacher who is much more knowledgeable than I am. She referred me to one of her TikTok projects in which her pupils had undertaken a very comprehensive study of antisemitism. As a result of the teacher's ability to use a specific skill she had acquired in a training session with a CDEC Foundation expert, the social tool was extremely effective in motivating the students*.

While acknowledging the benefits of social media, some educators expressed concern and caution about its use. Francesco stressed the need for caution and awareness of the potential negative effects that social media interactions can have, especially on impressionable individuals in the 13–14 age group:

> *I have realised that certain issues on social media can be very dangerous. They scare me a lot and I realise that they do a disservice to society*.

As educators continue to explore and navigate the digital landscape, it is clear that additional research, training and support are needed to fully realise the potential of digital technologies and social media for Holocaust education. The effective use of these technologies requires educators to be skilled in both pedagogy and technology. It is also crucial to understand and address the ethical considerations associated with the use of digital media.

DISCUSSION

While many studies have focused on examining the pedagogical choices Holocaust educators make in the classroom (Ben-Bassat, 2000; Carrier et al., 2015; Deutsch et al., 2018; Gross & Stevick, 2015; Pettigrew et al., 2009), our paper takes a unique approach by highlighting their learning ecology and commitment to lifelong learning in the field. By adopting a learning ecology perspective, we acknowledge that learning extends beyond the classroom or lecture hall to include multiple contexts, resources and interactions that shape educators' knowledge and practices (Barron, 2006; Jackson, 2013). Through the adopted conceptual framework, we gained valuable insights into educators' learning dispositions and their initial and ongoing learning strategies and practices (González-Sanmamed et al., 2019). This framework provided us with a rich pool of information that allowed for an in-depth analysis of their teaching experiences and professional development (Sangrà, Raffaghelli & Guitert, 2019). By considering the ecology of learning, we can better understand the multiple sources of knowledge and support that educators draw upon to deepen their understanding of the Holocaust and their approaches to teaching. This approach recognises the importance of continuous learning and the dynamic nature of professional development in Holocaust education (Foster et al., 2020).

The findings of this study highlight the diverse learning ecologies of Holocaust educators, particularly in terms of their attitudes and preferences towards learning (Stevick, 2017). The analysis of the first research question sheds light on the motivations that lead individuals to become Holocaust educators. These motivations can be broadly categorised in two directions, illustrating the complex interplay between personal experience and intellectual curiosity within educators' learning ecologies.

On the one hand, personal motivations often stem from significant childhood or adolescent experiences, such as interactions with Holocaust survivors, exposure to narratives of anti-Jewish persecution or deportation, or direct family connections to Holocaust victims (Hepworth, 2019). These experiences have a profound impact, fostering a strong sense of empathy, compassion and commitment to preserving the memory and lessons of the Holocaust for future generations (Bos, 2014). Within the learning ecology of educators, these personal motivations act as influential drivers of their commitment to Holocaust education.

On the other hand, intellectual curiosity and a deep desire to understand the motivations behind the systematic extermination of Jews play a significant role in attracting educators to the field. These educators perceive the Holocaust as an unprecedented and unfathomable event in human history that requires thorough research and analysis (Porat, 2021). Within their learning ecologies, they embark on a quest for knowledge and understanding, seeking answers to profound questions about human behaviour, moral responsibility and the mechanisms of genocide.

In examining personal motivations, the Holocaust has had a profound and lasting impact on teachers in Italy, spanning several generations (Gross & Stevick, 2010). Many educators feel a strong sense of civic and social responsibility towards the victims of the Holocaust and the relatively unknown Jewish heritage in their country (Achilles & Winnick, 2021; Ambrosewicz-Jacobs & Büttner, 2014; Gross, 2013). While the globalisation of Holocaust

remembrance and its associated human rights dimensions may be less influential in Italy (Eckmann, 2015), academic and professional development programmes for Italian teachers place great emphasis on the Shoah within the Italian context, highlighting local histories and experiences (Manca, 2022).

Regarding the second research question, which examines how educators develop their learning ecologies in terms of the learning process composed of available resources, activities and relationships, the initial steps taken by the 10 educators reveal a diverse range of learning processes. Three different types of initial learning ecologies can be identified. The first group consists of older educators, typically in their 50s and 60s, who had to rely on self-study due to the lack of specific training initiatives when they started their teaching careers. As they entered the profession before 2000, a key period in Italian educational policy on the Holocaust (Santerini, 2003), they had limited opportunities for institutionalised training. Conversely, younger educators have benefited from systematic and organised initial training opportunities, often integrated into their university studies. They have been able to combine formal training with non-formal or informal learning from an early stage, resulting in a more comprehensive learning ecology. Furthermore, individuals in the younger age group, around 40 years old, have experienced a shift from self-directed learning to formal education at an earlier stage. This shift has been influenced by the wide range of educational opportunities and the proliferation of cultural materials provided by the publishing and film industries, which have gained significant popularity since the 1990s (Ginsberg, 2004; Neiger et al., 2011; Perra, 2010; Popescu & Schult, 2015). In addition, although not directly explored in the interviews, it is possible that their initial motivations and interests influenced their learning processes, either in terms of the resources and activities they preferred to engage in, or in terms of a preference for formal or informal learning. However, no conclusive conclusion can be drawn as personal learning preferences may have influenced the choice of available opportunities. While the sample size of teachers surveyed is relatively small, it is worth noting that less than half of them reported being completely self-taught in Holocaust education. Generalisations from this sample should be made with caution, but this finding provides a contrast to larger surveys conducted on a broader scale, which highlight that most teachers had not received any formal training or professional development specifically focused on the Holocaust (Foster, 2013; Harbaugh, 2015; Stevick & Gross, 2015). Our findings may indicate a positive shift in recent years, with educators increasingly recognising the importance of acquiring the necessary knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach effectively about the Holocaust, although various factors should be taken into account. These include regional or cultural differences, the specific demographics of the sample, or the availability of training initiatives in different educational contexts.

When it comes to the preferred forms of lifelong learning ecologies, many teachers emphasise the importance of credibility, prestige and the possibility of gaining a final certification. They also value experiential initiatives, such as summer schools, which offer a combination of theoretical and practical learning experiences and the opportunity to expand their network of contacts among fellow educators and teachers. As a result of their commitment to preserving the integrity of Holocaust education, many teachers are constantly on the lookout for qualified experts who can help prevent the trivialisation and distortion of the Holocaust. This commitment is evident in their active search for experts who possess the knowledge and expertise necessary to ensure accurate and meaningful Holocaust education.

Another consideration is the importance of critical reflection in building on teachers' existing practice to improve Holocaust education. To articulate, share, discuss and apply new knowledge and understanding, both teachers and Holocaust education specialists would benefit greatly from engaging in critical reflection (Adamson, 2023; Foster, 2013). Engaging in critical reflection and being exposed to different interpretations of the Holocaust through

professional development opportunities enables teachers to enhance their pedagogical skills and knowledge.

Informal learning settings such as visits to memorials, museums or events focusing on the Holocaust are generally highly valued by educators (Cohen, 2016; Flennegård & Mattsson, 2021; Oren & Shani, 2012; Oztig, 2023; Saba, 2012). In our study, we found a balance between formal and informal learning preferences. While personal diversity is also evident in educators' preferences for independent study and personal exploration or group learning situations, for those who prefer learning situations organised by others, the need for accurate, up-to-date and certified information from institutions recognised as leaders in the field remains constant. For some of them, access to peer comparison and learning through sharing in groups or networks is equally important. Unfortunately, the educational work of Holocaust teachers is often an isolated endeavour with limited opportunities for collaboration (Brown & Davies, 1998). Many teachers find it difficult to overcome the isolation built into public school structures, which prevents them from learning from their highly qualified colleagues (Schweber, 2004). Therefore, there is a constant need to create the conditions for the development of professional learning networks (Dabbagh & Castañeda, 2020; Macià & García, 2016) that make use of online technologies and not only face-to-face learning situations.

In summary, in the absence of strong homogenising and centralising forces, the diversity of continuous learning is likely to remain as diverse as the teachers themselves (Eckmann et al., 2017). Although no significant differences were found between teachers in different subject areas, further research is needed to examine how their preferences for such learning ecologies are reflected in their engagement in the classroom (Schweber, 2004).

Regarding the third research question on how educators perceive digital resources, particularly social media, this study highlights that while there is a substantial body of literature on teachers' digital literacy (List, 2019), research specifically focused on this area remains limited. Our findings suggest that educators often rely on specialised websites, which are predominantly available in Italian, and that access to international resources is limited to those who are proficient in English. The use of social media for acquiring historical content or implementing teaching practices remains relatively limited, with only a small number of educators regularly exploring related social media platforms. Italian Holocaust museums and memorials predominantly serve national audiences, intertwining transnational Holocaust commemorative themes with distinctive national narratives (Manca, 2022). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the willingness of Holocaust memorials to engage with social media (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2021), teachers are still reluctant to incorporate social media technology into their professional development and teaching methods. It would be beneficial to explore ways in which professional development programmes, museums and memorials can promote the wider adoption of these technological platforms among educators in the future.

Expanding research in this area could provide a deeper understanding of the potential benefits and challenges associated with integrating digital resources, particularly social media, into the learning ecologies of Holocaust educators. By exploring the pedagogical strategies that educators employ within their learning ecologies, researchers can identify effective approaches to integrating digital resources and technology into Holocaust education.

In addition, research could explore the role of social media in fostering collaboration and networking opportunities (Trust et al., 2016). This could include exploring how educators use social media platforms to connect with peers, share resources and engage in professional discourse. Understanding the dynamics of these online communities can inform the development of strategies to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing among educators, ultimately enriching their learning experiences and professional growth (Trust et al., 2017).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The small scale of the study prevents us from drawing general conclusions about broader patterns within teachers' learning ecologies. It also has several methodological limitations, including collecting data at a single point of time and selecting a specific group of participants consisting of experienced and motivated educators, which may lead to biased conclusions. In addition, the lack of other data sources should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into teachers' understanding of their own learning in a way that would not have been possible with a survey study. It contributes to a neglected area of research on teachers' learning ecologies in relation to their role as Holocaust educators, particularly in countries without a Holocaust curriculum. As an exploratory study, it lays the groundwork for future research to build on and expand our understanding of this important area.

There are also important implications for teacher education and professional development. The interviews revealed that most academic teacher education programmes in Italy prioritise an in-depth historical approach over a more pedagogical or didactic one. While this may be specific to the Italian context and not reflective of other countries or regions, it appears that this approach also permeates non-academic training initiatives, such as online or residential seminars. This leaves many teachers with a wealth of valuable information but little operational and practical guidance. In the absence of a nationally defined pedagogical approach, they often must rely on guidance from other cultural contexts, sometimes even from abroad.

To address these issues, it is important that teacher education programmes and professional development initiatives provide a more balanced approach that prioritises both historical knowledge and pedagogical strategies. By providing more practical guidance and support, teachers will be better equipped to integrate the Holocaust into their curriculum and to engage their students in meaningful and effective ways.

The study also has implications for practice, suggesting that teacher education and lifelong learning ecologies need to consider multiple approaches. Teachers should be provided with opportunities to reflect on their teaching practice, philosophical approaches and personal and professional connections to the Holocaust in both formal and non-formal learning settings. Although this study did not identify clustering intentions, it is clear that different approaches to lifelong learning need to be considered.

Finally, formal and non-formal educational initiatives could benefit from encouraging the establishment of professional learning networks and communities of practice for Holocaust educators. These educators are responsible for a subject area that often falls outside of typical disciplinary curricula and can benefit from sharing values and concerns, as well as interacting regularly to improve their practice. Previous research has highlighted the value of communities of practice in other contexts, and this approach may prove useful for Holocaust educators (Chalmers & Keown, 2006; Patton & Parker, 2017).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors do not have permission to share data.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES

The research for this paper was pursued in accordance with the BERA Ethical Guidelines. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Shoah is the term preferred in Italy, see Michman (2021).

[2] The Italian television programme *Mixer* was broadcast on Mondays at prime time from 1980 to 1998 and covered news from the fields of politics, culture and entertainment. It is believed that the specific episode referred to by the educator who had a traumatic encounter with the Holocaust was broadcast in June 1989. During that episode, the programme screened Sidney Bernstein and Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 Holocaust documentary 'German Concentration Camps Factual Survey' in its entirety.

[3] Carabinieri are the national gendarmerie of Italy responsible for domestic and foreign policing. Together with the Polizia di Stato and the Guardia di Finanza, it is one of the principal law enforcement agencies in Italy. In contrast to the Polizia di Stato, the Carabinieri are a military force.

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