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**THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM
AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND A TRIGGER FOR EMPATHY
ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST**

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**ΤΟ ΜΝΗΜΕΙΟ ΚΑΙ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ ΤΟΥ AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU
ΩΣ ΠΗΓΗ ΓΝΩΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΝΑΥΣΜΑ ΓΙΑ ΕΝΣΥΝΑΙΣΘΗΣΗ
ΣΧΕΤΙΚΑ ΜΕ ΤΟ ΟΛΟΚΑΥΤΩΜΑ**

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ο σκοπός αυτού του άρθρου είναι να συζητήσει τις αλλαγές που αποτυπώθηκαν στην προσέγγιση και την κατανόηση του Ολοκαυτώματος από μαθητές δευτεροβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης μετά από δύο επισκέψεις στο Κρατικό Μουσείο και Μνημείο του Auschwitz-Birkenau στην Πολωνία κατά τα έτη 2013 και 2014. Η μελέτη βασίζεται σε παρατηρήσεις που προέκυψαν από τη συμμετοχή των μαθητών σε πιλοτικά προγράμματα που διοργανώθηκαν από το Εβραϊκό Μουσείο της Αθήνας, υπό την αιγίδα του Υπουργείου Παιδείας. Πριν από την επίσκεψή τους, οι μαθητές διδάχθηκαν το ιστορικό πλαίσιο της περιόδου στην τάξη τους και επισκέφθηκαν το Εβραϊκό Μουσείο στην Αθήνα. Λαμβάνοντας υπόψη σύγχρονες προσεγγίσεις της ιστορικής εκπαίδευσης, η

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αποτελεσματικότητα αυτού του προγράμματος αξιολογήθηκε ως προς τις μεταβαλλόμενες στάσεις των μαθητών σε σχέση με την κατανόηση του Ολοκαυτώματος και ως προς τον αντίκτυπό του στη ζωή τους δύο χρόνια μετά. Συγκεκριμένα, υποστηρίζεται ότι η επίσκεψη στο Μουσείο και Μνημείο του Auschwitz-Birkenau αποτέλεσε μια βιωματική προσέγγιση της έννοιας του Ολοκαυτώματος, η οποία, όχι μόνο αύξησε την ευαισθητοποίηση των μαθητών σχετικά με τη γενοκτονία του εβραϊκού πληθυσμού, αλλά και τους επέτρεψε να αλλάξουν πολλές πτυχές της προσωπικής νοηματοδότησης και συλλογικής τους δράσης για αυτό το θέμα. Με βάση την ανάλυση των δεδομένων, υποστηρίζω ότι η ένταξη στην εκπαιδευτική διαδικασία μιας επίσκεψης σε ένα χώρο μνήμης, όπως το Μουσείο και Μνημείο του Auschwitz-Birkenau, μπορεί να πυροδοτήσει την «ενσυναίσθηση ενδιαφέροντος» (Barton & Levstik 2004) για την ερμηνεία ενός δύσκολου/οδυνηρού παρελθόντος στο παρόν· μια ενσυναίσθηση ενδιαφέροντος που δεν στοχεύει αποκλειστικά στη συγκρότηση της «πολιτειότητας» των μαθητών αλλά και στη δημιουργία πολιτών που είναι ιστορικά συνειδητοποιημένοι.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the changes traced in secondary education students' approach to and understanding of the Holocaust, following two visits to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Poland in 2013 and 2014. The study is based on students' participation in these pilot programmes, which were organized by the Jewish Museum in Athens and were run under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Education. Prior to their visit, the students were taught the historical context of the period in their classroom and visited the Jewish Museum. By taking into consideration ongoing debates on history education, the effectiveness of this programme is evaluated in relation to both the changing attitudes and understanding of the Holocaust by the students and its impact on their lives two years later. Specifically, it is argued that the visit to the Holocaust Memorial in Auschwitz-Birkenau constitutes an experiential approach to the concept of the Holocaust that not only raised the students' awareness of the genocide of the Jewish population, but also allowed them to change many aspects of their personal understanding of and collective action about this issue. Taking into consideration the data analysis, I suggest that the inclusion of a visit to a site of memory, such as Auschwitz/Birkenau, in the educational process triggers the students' "empathy of care" (Barton & Levstik 2004), by interpreting the legacy of a painful/difficult past in the present: an "empathy of care" that is not solely targeted towards the establishment of "citizenship", but also towards the formation of historically aware citizens.

Introduction / Theoretical framework

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how sites of memory and specifically those related to the Holocaust could affect students' historical thinking. For this purpose, in the short theoretical framework that follows, I will refer to contemporary theories of history education that could help us better understand this issue.

Historical thinking, which contemporary history education intends to cultivate, is an issue considered in the foreground on a global scale (Seixas 2000; Nakou 2009; Shemilt 2011; Lee 2011; Ercikan & Seixas 2015). Opinions regarding the objectives of history education today mainly differ in relation to whether it must focus on “social” or “transformative purposes”.

According to Barton and Levstik (2004: 31), the cultivation of “active and cogitative citizens” lies at the heart of a democratic society, and, thus, approaching history education by emphasizing its “social purposes” aims at setting the concept of citizenship as a focal point in the subject of History. Barton and Levstik characteristically claim that:

History's place in the curriculum must be justified in terms of its contribution to democratic citizenship – citizenship that is participatory, pluralist, and deliberative – and its practices must be structured to achieve that end (Barton & Levstik 2004: 40).

Barton and Levstik (2004) also argue that “perspective recognition” and a form of empathy, which “revolves less around intellectual analysis and more around care”, may help students to engage the concept of “citizenship.” More specifically, for those scholars,

Care is the tool by which students –or any of us– make personal connections to history, and it has at least four components. *Caring about* refers to our historical interests, the topics about which we want (and feel we need) to learn. *Caring that* is the basis for moral judgments about the past, our reactions to the consequences of historical events. *Caring for* is perhaps the most emotionally laden component of this tool; it refers to the desire to help people in the past, even though such assistance is impossible, and it can be a powerful incentive to engage in the other aspects of historical study. Finally, *caring to* refers to the willingness to apply what has been learned in history to problems in the present; this kind of caring should be the endpoint of historical study in a democracy, as students deliberate over the common good, listen carefully to people with varied perspectives and backgrounds, and engage in reasoned judgments (Barton & Levstik 2004: 241-242).

However, according to Shemilt (2011: 93-94) and Lee (2006: 66, 2011: 148), the “social purposes” are likely to use the past towards a specific ideological direction. In particular, according to Lee's point of view,

If we think of history as an *instrument* for producing people who will subscribe to democracy, and mean by history the stories we tell, we have a problem. History is *part* of a democratic way of life, not a way of guaranteeing democrats. We learn to be democrats by joining in a way of life, not by being ‘sold’ it or ‘told’ it, least of all in specially contrived stories (Lee 2010: xiv).

Shemilt (2011: 93-94, 108, 112-113) notices that the filters often created for the exploration of the past with a view to enabling the young subjects to comply with the “common good” can lead to an “unhistorical” approach to the past. As opposed to the “social purposes” of history education, Lee (2011) gives priority to the “transformative purposes” of history (Transformative History).¹ “Transformative purposes” of history are supported by the “disciplinary approach” that aims at helping students to learn the methods of history, how to study the past by the use and the interpretation of sources, and to cultivate historical thinking (Seixas 2010; Seixas & Morton 2013), “because the use and interpretation of the sources facilitate the development of specific mental actions that make history learning possible” (Nakou 2009: 99).

A basic tool of the “disciplinary approach” to history education relates to the use of historical concepts. More specifically, Lee and Ashby (2000: 199; Lee 2005: 32-33, 41, 61) distinguish the “first order” concepts from the “second order” concepts, the knowledge of which can contribute to our address and understanding of the past. First-order concepts or concepts of content (substantive concepts) relate to what is relevant to History, that is, names, facts etc. On the other hand, the “second order or procedural concepts” structure and explain historical facts according to historical research (Lee 2005: 32-33, 2011: 144). Lee (2005: 169) refers to six “second order concepts” which form the discipline of history: “time”, “cause”, “change”, “evidence”, “accounts” and “historical empathy”. According to him, the “disciplinary approach” advocates the historical understanding of the “second order concepts” that help young subjects “understand history as a way of seeing the world” (2011: 140). Consequently, a “transformation” can occur in many ways and at different levels, as long as it can change our prior knowledge or our views, for example

in how we see political or social possibilities and constraints on our own or others’ identity, our sense of the wounds and burdens we inherit, and the adequacy of explanations of major features of the world (Lee 2011: 130).

Historical thinking is a dynamic process and outside the school environment. School History and “public histories” seem to be increasingly looking for a way to be connected (Kasvikis & Andreou 2008: 123-124; Nakou 2009: 87). Monuments, buildings, ruins, historical landscapes and museums constitute landscape sources (Repousi 2004: 89), “images of civilization” (Mattozzi 2006) and historical representations that overwhelm the students’ everyday life. Moreover, material life could play an effective role in teaching history that focuses on frameworks of change so that students can produce big pictures of the past (Lee 2011). As he points out,

a framework that identifies changes in material life, social and political organizations, and a variety of other themes offers a potentially powerful tool to allow genuine orientation in time. Such a framework of change enables teachers to explore markers or criteria of change with students (Lee 2011: 143).

In this paper, my focus will be on the impact of visits to sites of memory² –especially to Auschwitz– on students’ way of thinking about the past. According to Nora’s typology of lieux de mémoire (1989), Auschwitz is a topographical site of memory, not only as a site of the martyrdom of Jews, but also of other groups, constituting one of the most significant concentration camps of World War II. When we visit Auschwitz, our attention is drawn to the Holocaust, an exceptionally important event for modern historiography (Kokkinos 2007; Kokkinos, Lemonidou & Agtzidis 2010; Liakos 2011; Fleischer 2012), as well as to the notion of trauma and its management (Kokkinos 2010, 2012, 2015), an issue which is dealt with by memory studies (Ricoeur 2009; Droumpouki 2014).

As far as teaching the Holocaust is concerned,³ the primary aim is for the students to become familiar with “in site learning”, using material sources as testimonies of the past in order to find ways of interpreting this “difficult” heritage (Macdonald 2008). Such an educational approach is implemented in many countries (Wrenn 2001; Salmons 2001; Andrews 2010; Waters 2010), and is studied at a research level in terms of how students might be helped to use site visits and museums in order to approach and understand the Holocaust (Cowan & Maitles 2009; Chapman, Edwards & Goldsmith 2010; Cowan & Maitles 2017). However, up until now, similar approaches have not been applied to a great extent in the Greek educational system⁴ (Droumpouki 2014: 468-469).

Taking into consideration the above cited views, I suggest that the impact of visiting a memory place on students’ historical thinking could be explained through both “social” and “transformative” approaches to history education. For this reason, in this specific paper, the students’ answers have been read with regard to both “cognition” and “empathy of care”. More specifically, I propose that, when referring to an exceptional historical event, such as the Holocaust, and when this is approached through visits to relevant sites of memory, the term “transformation” should be used in its most literal sense. In this case, historical understanding could be conceived as a combination of Lee’s cognitively-oriented formulation and a kind of empathy that approximates Barton and Levstik’s (2004: 228-243) “empathy of care”. Recent researches have proposed that “emotional experiences and cognitive experiences [...] are indeed linked”.⁵

Description of the programme

According to Varon-Vassard (2012), the emergence of the memory of the genocide of the Jews in Europe and Greece was a painful process. Only in the 1990s have we witnessed the monumentalization of the Holocaust. Since 2007, the teaching of the genocide of Jews has been included in school history, however in a rigid curriculum that often does not allow deeper insight into this issue. Since 2004, the Jewish Museum of

Greece has been organizing seminars for teachers. Also, in 2004 an annual Memorial Day was established in Greece, included in the school curriculum only recently. In the last five years, a video creation contest on the Holocaust for school students was organized by the Jewish Museum in Athens, under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Education. As a result of their participation, small groups of secondary school students visit the Auschwitz Memorial and Museum every year.

My paper refers to two relevant pilot educational visits held with my students to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum of in Poland for two consecutive school years (9-11 May 2013, and 4-6 May 2014). Our activity followed the schedule of the “Lessons from Auschwitz Project” (LFAP), which involves educational school visits for students 16 to 18 year old. The project consisted of four steps:⁶ an orientation seminar and an oral testimony from a survivor; the visit itself; a follow-up seminar in order to enable students and teachers to reflect on the impact of the visit; and, finally, activities through which students try to disseminate what they have learnt.

The first visit (2013) involved seventeen students and six teachers from different schools, whereas the second visit (2014) involved eighteen students and six teachers. My school, a vocational high school, participated with eight students. Both visits were followed up by an investigation of the effects of the visit through a diverse range of subsequent activities.

Before the visit to Auschwitz

Classroom preparation included the initial completion by the students of a task sheet in which they reported their prior knowledge and expressed their relevant worries in connection with the Holocaust and the significance of this specific historical event in their lives (see Appendix I). Teaching included documentaries and films as well as projections related to the Holocaust.⁷ Additionally, the Jewish Museum offered a tour of its exhibitions. The tour at the Museum focused on the history of the Jewish people, in general, and the life of Jews in Greece, in particular. The Holocaust of the Greek Jews was highlighted in relation to the relevant sections of the museum, but also in relation to the temporary exhibition “Sinagonistis” (“The Co-fighter”), which dealt with the participation of Greek Jews in the National Resistance during the Nazi Occupation (1941-1944). This educational programme was complemented by the oral testimony⁸ of a Greek survivor from the Auschwitz Camp, a historical source that was assessed on its educational basis through the feedback produced later in the classroom.

During the visit

Every year, the group of schoolchildren and their teachers visited specific locations in Auschwitz I, the administrative centre of the wider camp, which had specific functions. The visit started with Block 4, with the exhibition “Extermination”, in which the process of the deportation of Jews to the Camp was described. The exhibition offered information about the arrival of the prisoners and the process of selection and mass murder in the gas chambers, through photographs, photocopies of camp documents, and original artefacts.

The group also visited the exhibition in Block 5, called “Evidence of Crimes Against Humanity” (see Białecka et.al. 2010), focused on the mass murder of Jews. This was presented through everyday objects (shoes, suitcases, cooking utensils, a variety of different brushes and other personal possessions) brought to the camp by the victims themselves in their luggage. The exhibitions in Block 6 entitled “The Life of the Prisoners” that documented the extermination of people of various nationalities (for example, the medical experiments on children), and in Block 7 that showed the living conditions of prisoners (see Smolen 2009) were also included in the tour.

Block 11, called the “Death Block”, was a prison camp in the past but today presents equipment and furniture of SS officials and prison rooms of that time. Following this, students were taken to the site of the crematoria and gas chambers. Both visits ended with the national exhibition of Israel in Block 27, which reports on the life of Jews before and after the Holocaust (Picture 2). It includes survivors’ oral testimonies, documents and exhibits related to the Nazi ideology and propaganda as well as children’s drawings.

At Birkenau, the tour included the railway line and crematoria (closed and open-air). The exhibition in the “sauna” (Picture 3), with photographs depicting the happy lives of Jews before their arrival, is particularly moving. Both tours ended with the visit to the Memorial (Picture 4).



Picture 1. Students at Auschwitz-Birkenau (May 2014).



Picture 2. Students at the Auschwitz Museum (May 2014).



Picture 3. Students at the exhibition in the "Sauna" of Birkenau (May 2014).



Picture 4. The Greek Memorial at Birkenau.

After the visit

After the return to school, the students of both groups completed a relevant task-sheet (see Appendix I) in which they expressed their knowledge about the Holocaust and some new questions that had arisen. Students were also asked to write a personal report evaluating their participation in the project. In addition, a meeting took place at the Jewish Museum in Athens, where the students discussed personal thoughts, feelings and general concerns that emerged from their whole experience.

Results

This paper is based on the analysis of the students' written data, in particular the written responses to questions that aimed to test their knowledge of the Holocaust before and after the visit. The analysis of the written data collected from the two groups showed that before the visit five out of eight students had no specific knowledge, while two had limited knowledge. After the visit, all of them had acquired new knowledge about the Holocaust by placing it into the historical context of World War II (see Appendix II).

Oral data were also analysed. These emerged from a "group interview"⁹ with a sample of three students who volunteered as an "available or convenient sample" (Nova-Kaltsouni 2006: 38) for the ex-post research that was conducted in the summer of 2016. The aim of this interview was to detect and delineate the students' reflections after a period of two and three years, respectively, for each group. The questions and axes of the semi-structured interview (see Appendix III) were designed according to the

suggestions offered in the European pack for visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum.¹⁰

The analysis presented below is based on a combination of the written data (the personal reports they produced immediately following their visit) and the oral data. The categories that emerged from the analysis were *personal feelings/sentiments*, *understanding through space and materiality*, and *connecting past and present through action*. It must be stressed that the students' answers have been considered in the context of changes occurred in both their "cognition" and "empathy of care" related to the Holocaust. It is important to note that the students' responses did not always fall neatly into just one category, and that the analysis of the students' ideas, soon after their visit and two years later, was conducted according to the qualitative method of analysis.¹¹

Personal feelings / sentiments

The first question that the students were asked to respond to by writing a report when they returned from Auschwitz was: *What are your thoughts and feelings following your visit to the Auschwitz site of memory?* This open question aimed at recording students' personal thoughts and feelings that emerged from their experience of the visit.

In their responses, students express a change at a personal level, in relation to what they hoped to see and feel before travelling to the site and what they felt when they were actually there.

Barton and Levstik (2004: 232) argue that "Students *cared about* topics that allowed them to explore the feelings and experiences of people in the past and relate them to their own lives", an interest that appears in the answers below. We also detect a *caring that* considers "historical events and patterns that revolve around issues of justice or fairness to be particular important" (Barton & Levstik 2004: 233). For example, the students expressed their sympathy especially for the people who experienced confinement and its consequences.

It is true that when I was informed about my upcoming visit to the Auschwitz's hellhole I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I felt curiosity and anxiety to see the place where thousands of people were tortured and found horrible death and on the other, I was very moved and furious because of this abhorrent atrocity. Once I arrived at the place of martyrdom and saw where innocent lives were subjected to the Nazi barbarism and unnecessarily exterminated, I realized the drama and magnitude of human suffering. Sorrow and sadness were the feelings that gripped me as images of misery and humiliation of human life emerged in front of me (Efi, 17 years old; visit May, 2014).

The experience and impressions from our visit to the Monument of Auschwitz were unprecedented. The feelings that this visit triggered were many and complicated. At some point I cried and felt the great need to mentally embrace all who lived in suffering and met death from the actions of criminals Nazis (Dimitris, 16 years old; visit May, 2013).

The second question that the students were asked to reflect on was the following: *If you were given the chance, what would you say to a friend of yours about this journey?* If we take a deeper look at the responses to this specific question, we realize how their visit to such an important memory site enabled them to feel personal interest about the victims (*caring about*).

My friends were astonished by the narration about the people who lived there and they considered me as extremely lucky that we live in peace today. As a matter of fact, they wished to make the same visit at some point in their lives (Dimitris, 16 years old; visit May, 2013).

All of my friends were left speechless by the details which I described to them about everything that I experienced in this scene of suffering in Auschwitz. They could not conceive the fact that human cruelty has no limits (Antonis, 16 years old; visit May, 2013).

If an opportunity presented itself to a friend or a member of my family to visit the site of Auschwitz, I would advise them to take the plunge and visit this place without having second thoughts, because it is considered to be a breath-taking experience, one that can affect you deeply, an experience that can bring you sadness, pain and this sentiment of encouragement and compassion towards the people who were sacrificed while experiencing incredible moments of cruelty. Moreover, I would say to him/her that he/she is going to experience something that will always follow him/her throughout his/her life because the monument of Auschwitz is the living memory of the most inhuman actions of Hitler and his followers (Stelios, 16 years old; visit May, 2013).

Obviously, the visit played a seminal role in allowing the students to express feelings / sentiments about human cruelty and their sympathy for the victims as well as their aversion towards the cruelty these victims faced in Auschwitz (*caring that*). It seems that the inclusion of the visit in the educational process triggered the students' sentiment and emotional relevance in a way that, as Liakos (2011: 64) points out, "is part of the process of recognizing the world and thus of the historical consciousness". Moreover, Rösen (2008: 51) mentions that "a deep emotion can be conceptualized into a historical category which discloses new chances for future directed historical thinking with all its cognitive forces". Subsequently, a visit to a site of memory seems to trigger students' emotional relevance, which is a part of historical understanding, especially of the Holocaust.

Understanding through space and materiality

In his written essay, the following student refers to specific ruins, the crematoria, which had affected him deeply. His narration maps material objects, buildings, the area of Auschwitz-Birkenau with a documentary character. He notes the contrast between the wider countryside and the atrocities, which historically mark the concentration camp, and expresses his thoughts by placing the Holocaust within the context of World War II.

My visit to the Auschwitz and Birkenau extermination camps, I would say, was a shocking life experience. The images of the crematoria and the gas chambers left me speechless. I was also shocked by the view of the tufts of hair of the murdered innocent people in Auschwitz. In Birkenau the horrible barbed wires, the rails of trains carrying the prisoners that were sentenced to death and the huge facilities that showed the scale of the disaster have been imprinted in my memory. The contrast between the very beautiful landscape and the tragic things that happened during the Second World War made a great impression on me (Nikos, 16 years old; visit May, 2013).

A schoolgirl refers, *inter alia*, to how she connected the knowledge acquired through the preparatory activities in school with the experience of the visit. It is pointed out that the place as space and materiality (“We found the lost pieces of a puzzle which we placed appropriately in our minds”, “Each part of the visit made me feel and think differently”) helped her empathize and think of the Holocaust, even though in stereotypical way.

Regarding the visit, nothing was completely unknown to each of us due to the preparation we had, nevertheless the following things occurred: we learned new things, as if we found the lost pieces of a puzzle which we placed appropriately in our minds. Each piece of the visit made me feel and think differently. The thought to put myself in the place of those helpless and doomed to death people was almost something impossible. What I found most impressive was that the Germans tormented them psychologically, even though they were going to die. The Nazis were so presumptuous and insensitive that they were wrongly called humans. Finally, faced with the likelihood of a recurrence of all these events I felt fear (Efi, 17 years old, written essay; visit May, 2014).

The following written response from a student of the second group also depicts his personal feelings and thoughts. The materiality of history gradually leads him to be more interested in the issue (*caring about*), wondering about the underlying causes of the Holocaust.

Facing the famous gate of the camp, I realized that everything I had ever heard and read, all these things happened in this place. My curiosity was growing. My eyes scanned everything in order to keep them in my mind as thoroughly as possible. They walked here. They lived here. They died here. All these people. And murdered in cold blood. I spent my whole day seeing exhibits. Seeing places where the prisoners lived and hearing stories of them. Everything, from photos and personal items to the room with the hair of women and the places where they were kept made me realize the known, but unthinkable. They were human beings. Millions of people who died in order to satisfy the fury of some. Just because they belonged to a group, to any group, from homosexuals to Jews, just because Nazis didn't like the group. The aversion that I felt for the Nazis, for fascism and everything that degrades human life, was something new. I wish I could help them. All the above made me feel guilty. Guilty that

history is going to repeat itself and I cannot stop it (Ilias, 17 years old; visit May, 2014).

The materiality of history seems to lead this student to consider human rights (*caring that*). He points out social, religious, cultural and ethnic diversity in his attempt to understand how and why the Holocaust happened. His answers indicate that the place challenged his previous stereotypes, and enabled him to put the genocide into the context of World War II. Kitson (2001: 48) argues that “the fact that millions died as a consequence of an obsessive and irrational hatred and that circumstances conspired to allow it happen” is a very important target in teaching the Holocaust. At the same time, the student wishes he could help victims. Barton and Levstik (2004) explain the category of “caring for”, by pointing out that

when students care about a topic in history and when they care that people were mistreated, they often wish they could react in some concrete and meaningful way; in a sense, they want somehow to care for the victims of injustice by providing support or assistance even though they know that such time travel is impossible (Barton & Levstik 2004: 234-235).

The student also makes an indirect evaluation of the past as he “incriminates” himself by talking about personal responsibility in relation to any future act of “Holocaust” in the present (*caring that*).

Subsequently, visiting places of informal learning is one among many other ways in which students encounter the narrative of the Holocaust. This encounter in memory places becomes more vivid for them as it could give “a sense of the relationship between people and place” (Waters 2010) in the base of materiality; a materiality that triggers many aspects of “empathy of care” about the Jewish genocide.

Connecting past and present through action

Furthermore, oral answers (given during the interview process) to the question “*How did you deal with the experience we had at the site of Memory?*” reveal that the visit allowed for correlations and comparisons with the present.

Educator: How did you deal with the experience we had at the site of Memory?

Student: I got more informed.

Educator: You got new knowledge. How did you handle it during the period of two years?

Student: I didn’t use it. But, it had helped me to think of things.

Educator: What are these things?

Student: In general, the historical context of the past, what its relation with the now is.

Educator: What do you mean?

Student: That the phenomena of time are related to the present.

(Schoolboy, 17 years old, interview excerpt; visit May, 2014)

During the interview and when asked how he had been dealing with the experience of his visit to Auschwitz these two years, the student stressed the fact that this experience “made him more sensitive” regarding similar situations in the present. Moreover, it gave him arguments for various discussions. These comments suggest “not only that students are willing to apply what they have learned from history but that they have consciously reflected on the need to do so”, as Barton and Levstik (2004:239) have noted when explaining the expression of the *caring to* category.

Educator: How did you deal with the experience we had at the site of Memory?

Student: I started being more sensitive, especially now because of the rise of some threats and because humanity has reached a point of high friction, the visit to Auschwitz gave me a solid foundation in order to be able to discuss it with people and show them what is evil in all that. (Kostas, 17 years old, interview excerpt; visit May, 2014)

The interviews that I conducted two years later allow us to draw similar conclusions. One of the questions that I asked students in those interviews was: “*Which contemporary aspects of our society refer to the concepts that directly or indirectly give prominence to the existence of Auschwitz?*” It is evident that several notions, such as the prevention of racism, social injustice, the assertion of morality, the freedom of speech, the right to respect one another in matters of religious convictions, and so on, would clearly stem from the children’s thought as simplistic analogies. However, the fact that they make a comparison of these values with the values asserted today indicates that the students are searching for changes, differences between past and present, concepts that are considered to be of crucial importance for understanding the past.

Educator: Which contemporary aspects of our society refer to concepts that are directly or indirectly indicated by the existence of Auschwitz?

Student: I think that it helped me evolve into a more moral person, to start appreciating certain values more, such as morality and freedom of speech. By the time I understood that we are surrounded by extreme social injustice targeting other social subgroups like people of different religions, people from different countries, generally a fact that becomes so obvious when you start looking around you. (Ilias, 17 years old, interview excerpt; visit May, 2014)

Student: The fact that the world, the part of the world that knows what happens, has the proof, yet it continues to believe that everything is what it’s supposed to be, I don’t think it’s right.

Educator: What does it mean?

Student: That they are racists, that racism exists.

Educator: Were you aware of that meaning before?

Student: No, I wasn't aware of it; let's say that I was more naïve [...]. Also that the majority of civilizations today are based on this racism and use it as an example in order to copy [the Nazi past] and produce similar things, like ISIS, for example. (Efi, 17 years old, interview excerpt; visit May, 2014)

These data and some of the written and oral answers phrased by the following student were quite distinctive, expressing a *caring to* with regard to the issue of the genocide of Jews. The focus of his written essay lies on the undertaking of social action against racism and fascism.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the students and professors with whom I shared this experience. I would also like to thank all the people who contributed to the making of this journey, and I would really like the people responsible for this programme to pass on this opportunity to even more people in the future; to see and feel all of the things that I saw and felt. This experience made me feel more human and vulnerable than ever. It made me realize how small we are, all of us. And me, as a small unit to fight and create more units. The goal is that the small units can one day become a larger group, a unity and for me to fight the effects of racism and fascism, using my general knowledge as a starting point. These are the effects that are increasingly and deeply penetrating our society these days (Schoolboy, 17 years old, written essay; visit May, 2014).

In his oral answer, this student focuses on the “change” in his thinking and the use of his knowledge (“It was a huge turnaround in comparison to the way I was getting informed and perceived reality before”) while visiting Auschwitz. Students “consider themselves to be better informed about issues”, as Barton and Levstik (2004: 235) argue in order to explain the category *caring for*. In other words, the student is more open to criticize how history is written and presented, how the facts are presented, what is provable and what is not.

Educator: Which contemporary aspects of our society refer to concepts that are directly or indirectly indicated by the existence of Auschwitz?

Student: First of all, it was a lesson in how power can corrupt you and make you commit atrocities just because you thought you're right. Moreover, you think about being open to several opinions, being able to read and receive proper information. It was a huge turnaround in comparison to the way I was getting informed and perceived reality before.

Educator: What do you mean?

Student: It helped me not to dismiss. The memory site made me profoundly understand what happened, that these events did occur, that they weren't a figment of the imagination because there is a percentage of people who don't believe in these events. (Schoolboy 17 years old, interview excerpt; visit May, 2014)

In the next abstract of his answer, a school student mentions the “denial” of the Holocaust (see Kokkinos 2013), a notion that probably entered into students’ conversations. It has to be pointed out that these reactions were never discussed in the classroom, because clearly this kind of arguments are hushed up in places where arguments can be presented. This interview, at least for me as a history teacher, was quite revealing of the type of questions that they received from their peers. Apparently, certain stereotypical convictions that alter history and enforce the rejection of the Holocaust were dealt with from a more substantial point of view via this circle of students and their collective conversations, underlying another factor that we have to encounter regarding how we as teachers can approach the genocide of Jews historically. Keep in mind that these conversations focused on the documentary character of materiality.

Educator: What did the schooling community think about this visit?

Student: There were some people who did want to learn, who were actually interested and there were others who couldn’t care less about the subject... However, there were some people that were deeply touched and others who posed some questions just for the sake of posing questions.

Educator: What exactly did they ask you?

Student: They asked us what exactly the material that we saw was; the structure of the setting, how it was set, if that was more of the visual part and generally the confirmation about all this information. (Schoolboy, 17 years old; visit May, 2014)

At this point, I would like to refer to my personal experience. Teaching at a Vocational High School is not an easy choice, even more so making your students love History. What I realized during the four years of my service at this school was that a change of attitude regarding controversial or traumatic events as the Holocaust was observed in the entire schooling community in the course of time. During the presentation of a research study under the main subject of racism in the school year 2011-2012, there was a specific group of students that reacted strongly against our work. Two years later, we managed to celebrate the national commemoration of World War II Resistance on the 28th of October, and make a tribute to this period and specifically to the Holocaust, without having any unpleasant reactions. Someone may think that it was coincidental; however, the schooling environment and the change observed in the students’ attitudes are insightfully described during the process of the interview, in the interviewee’s comments.

This journey was followed by several actions. Let us say that the next year, the students who became members of the school board carried out one action and one briefing; in other words, we tried to become more active, to make the students become aware of what we saw and what we experienced (Schoolboy, 17 years old, interview excerpt; visit May, 2014).

The above excerpt refers to how this visit to a memory site influenced these students' participation in the schooling environment at large, which signifies a change in the course of time regarding the active and real undertaking of collective activities at school as well as their social action across a wider spectrum. Barton and Levstik (2004) note characteristically in their explanation of the concept *caring to*:

The ultimate purpose of history education, in our view, is to enable students to take action in the present, and if they are going to take action, they must care to do so –that is, they must be willing, based on what they learned, to make changes in their own values, attitudes, beliefs or behaviour (Barton & Levstik (2004: 237).

In effect, the visit triggered an “empathy of care” that encouraged the students to see their lives differently. Subsequently, the change that was traced in secondary students' approaches is a “social” one, as Barton and Levstik (2004) argue, the one that refers to the notion of “citizenship”.

Discussion / Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how memory sites can affect students' historical thinking about traumatic heritage, such as the Holocaust. Considering the analysis of the written and oral data, it is suggested that changes in students' attitudes occurred at different levels.

First, changes occurred at a personal level, as students became more interested and emotionally connected to the issue of the Holocaust through the experience of one of the most important concentration camps –Auschwitz. Taking into consideration students' comments, it is obvious that “emotional connection, in the form of care is a critical tool making sense of the past” (Barton & Levstik 2004: 240), especially in sites of memory.

According to the students' views, the space and materiality of the memory site played a major documentary role in their inquiry about the Holocaust and motivated students to care about the past. Many researchers in the field of historical education claim that the material remains of the past are more than another kind of resource open to various interpretations (Nakou 2000). They argue that they are tangible indications of life in the past for students (see Jones 2011) and offer them the opportunity to build or strengthen many skills, such as the induction of historical perspective, the understanding of historical context, and the re-contextualization of remains in historical time and space (Kouser 2015). Others claim that this happens because the materiality of history is connected with students' everyday life in the present and for this reason they can compare and identify changes between the present and the past (Barton & Levstik 2004). Moreover, students studying material culture can create frameworks of the present-past; in other words, they can use their knowledge of the past in order to add a more profound significance to the present (Apostolidou 2009: 130). As Waters (2010) points out,

For most of our students on their recent history trip, it was their most profound experience primarily because they were so affected by the sites there –the scale of the Holocaust was more tangible once it became situated in a place (Waters 2010: 9).

As shown by my research, the status of knowledge that the participating students had regarding the Holocaust before getting involved in the programme also changed after the visit. Specifically, prior knowledge of the historical era/period was changed by placing the Holocaust in the totality of World War II. Students claimed that they better understood the causes of racism in their lives today by visiting a memory site. Their attitude regarding the wider collective schooling environment was also changed, in that they actively participated in actions and practices that addressed the corresponding concerns related to this particular historical event. The school team became less ‘intimidated’.

On a wider social and political level, a change in their attitude towards controversial or difficult topics occurred, and a mind-set of active citizenship was fostered. The students reinforced their arguments about this particular historical framework and, most importantly, they could now bring those forward in their discussions. Some expressed social concerns more clearly than before, because of this experience and, those who had not pursued it –simply because they had not been given the opportunity to do so– had already changed their way of thinking as far as the past and the present are concerned.

Considering these results, it should be pointed out that “change” is not restricted to the cognitive qualities, according to Lee’s (2011) definition, but also to “social” qualities, as Barton and Levstik (2004) argue. The visits to Auschwitz allowed students to approach the event of the Holocaust from a multiple point-of-view that sites of memory can trigger. Changes in students’ behaviour arose through the methodology of the educational process, through the recruiting knowledge that emerges as a result of the combination of formal and informal education. As Barton and Levstik indicate (2004),

[T]he task is not to define history in such a way that either perspective recognition or care is abandoned, but rather to maintain a productive tension between the two. Students are more likely to find historical study interesting and challenging if they have access to both these tools than if they try to employ either in isolation. Moreover, although we can attempt to study history without caring, we are unsure why anyone would want to (Barton & Levstik 2004: 242).

To be more specific, teaching the history of the Holocaust through visits to relevant sites of memory can result in a type of change in which “empathy of care” plays a catalyst role for perspective recognition of the past. It constitutes a “care” that is not solely targeted towards the establishment of “citizenship” but also towards the creation of a historically aware citizen –a type of citizenship that is situated in a

historical continuum; one that not only refers to the present, but is also informed by the past.

The results outlined in this paper can be compared with those from other similar studies concerning the assessment of student visits to Auschwitz. Cowan and Maitles (2009) investigated the impact of the Lessons from Auschwitz Project (LFAP) on Scottish students, while Chapman, Edwards and Goldsmith (2010) assessed the relevant impacts in England. Both studies showed that the visits had a positive impact both on students' knowledge about the Holocaust and on their personal thinking. Both the Scottish and English students were subsequently involved in related activities in their schools and local communities. Even though, in the present research, different ways of assessing the impact of the visits were used and on a very small sample of students, the results suggested that materiality in relation to space and the experiential dimensions of the topic of the Holocaust in-situ, resulted in an increase in the depth of knowledge and enquiry amongst the students. In particular, emotional connection with the issues highlighted during the visits resulted in the triggering of a framework of cognitive understanding.

Following a number of issues raised by the results of similar studies, in terms of the students' views after their visits to sites of memory, a number of questions were raised as to how to address the Holocaust. As suggested by Chapman, Edwards and Goldsmith (2010) and Cowan and Maitles (2017), it may be beneficial to extend the visits to two days. In this way, the students could work within an educational programme that provides them with the possibility to explore historical enquiry in a multi-perspectival context beyond the classroom. Students could work on queries about the meaning of memorialization of the Holocaust nowadays, to examine the different interpretations of the Holocaust, how history is constructed and reconstructed through sites of memory and for which purposes, thus, significantly increasing the depth of their historical thinking.

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Notes

¹ For a more profound signification of the “Transformative History” and the “disciplinary approach”, see Lee 2011.

² With regard to the sites of memory, see Giannakopoulos & Giannitsiotis 2010; Benveniste & Paradellis 1999; Boardman 2007; Yofee 2007.

³ For teaching the Holocaust, see Totten & Feinberg 2016; Cowan & Maitles 2017; *Teaching History Issues* 2001: 104, 2010: 141.

⁴ The approach to traumatic/controversial facts constitutes a difficult issue in the domain of historical education (see Kokkinos 2010, 2012; Kokkinos, Lemonidou & Agtzidis 2010). Schoolbooks and syllabi in Greece do not allow an in-depth management of the issue (see Palikidis 2013).

⁵ See Henderson 2015 in Cowan and Maitles 2017:134.

⁶ See: <https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme/how-the-lfa-project-works> (retrieved: 20/8/2017).

⁷ The use of the audiovisual material was consistent with contemporary educational approaches to the issue (see Lemonidou 2013: 54-56).

⁸ The oral testimony was given in both cases by the Greek survivor Isaac Misan.

⁹ According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2008: 483-485), the advantages of a group interview are the plurality of answers, the concentration of “persons acting as representatives of various collective activities”, and the creation of a more familiar and friendly environment for the interviewed students.

¹⁰ This supplementary educational material issued in 2010 has been posted online at Auschwitz URL address.

http://auschwitz.org/gfx/auschwitz/userfiles/auschwitz/inne/european_pack_for_visiting_auschwitz.pdf, retrieved: September 20, 2016 (retrieved 20/8/2017).

¹¹ Apostolidou’s comment (2009: 130-131) was apt and very essential on the role of the teacher as researcher in qualitative research:

“The game or the challenge lies in not discriminating, while we use ourselves in understanding data or the sources (depending on what kind of research we conduct: social or historical). Otherwise, we should know that we will discriminate anyway because we see things from our point of view of experiences and not from another researcher’s point of view (whose experience or story we do not have). Clearly, there are attempts to interpret data in the context where they were produced. But this context is neither given nor clear. Nor do the participants offer it easily; we reconstruct it by what they say and by our other knowledge”.

¹¹ Additionally, “caring appears to be the catalyst for triggering greater cognitive understanding” as McCully and Montgomery (2009: 101) claim, while it made teachers see the other side in a state of rivalry (i.e., multiperspectivity), by visiting a historical place. Many researchers underline the need to teach the Holocaust with a multi-perspective focus (Hammond 2001; Kitson 2001; Salmons 2010).

Appendices

Appendix I.

Questions at the beginning of the programme (before the visit) and after the visit

At the beginning of the programme (before the visit):

1. What do you know about the Holocaust?
2. Write in the space below any questions or issues you thought about the Holocaust.
3. What is the significance of the Holocaust in our lives today?

After the visit

1. What do you know about the Holocaust?
2. Write in the space below any questions or issues you thought about the Holocaust after visiting the Auschwitz monument.
3. What are your thoughts and feelings following your visit to the site of Memory?
4. If you were given the chance what would you say to a friend of yours about this trip?

Appendix II.

Responses to the question *What do you know about the Holocaust?*

At the beginning of the programme (before the visit)	After the visit
Nothing so important, just that the Nazis killed the Jews.	Yes, I know a lot about the Holocaust, actually I went to Auschwitz/Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Poland within an educational programme, with another 18 students. Hitler and his army killed Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and kids in different concentration camps during the WWII event but the camp we went to was one of the most important.
The Holocaust was when the Germans concentrated Jews in camps and tortured and killed them, as my teacher told us.	The process of killing the Jews in a cruel way by the Nazis in the context of the Second World War.

I know that Germans tortured the Jewish people in order to kill them.	The Nazis perpetrated crimes against humanity during the Second World War. The Holocaust was the attempt to murder Jews. I've learnt a lot in Auschwitz/ Birkenau when I went on a visit with a school group.
The Holocaust means that something has been burnt.	It is an important historical fact which marked the world and I believe that everybody has to be informed. Because six million people have been killed in a torturing way.
I don't know anything specific about this subject.	I know that the Holocaust concerns the deaths of six million Jews, including a lot of children murdered by the Nazis across Europe. All of them were murdered for racist reasons and for other reasons.
I have heard about the Holocaust, it is not the best that happened. We have talked with our professor in the classroom about Hitler who killed six million people, mostly women and young children. This is because the Jews were his rivals. He killed them in the camps and shut them up in gas chambers where they died.	The mass murder of Jewish people during the Second World War is called "the Holocaust". Hitler believed that the Germans were superior and that he had to kill every one that couldn't accept his belief. The most famous camp was Auschwitz. The purpose of Nazi Germany was to conquer Europe.
It is the first time that I have heard about the Holocaust and I would like to know more about this.	The Nazis would like to get rid of all the different people like Jews, Gypsies, even disabled people and other political groups.
I don't know a lot, but I've seen a film once.	The Holocaust describes the death of Jews in concentration camps during the WWII event. I've seen one of the most important concentration camps, that is, the one in Auschwitz, with another 17 students this year. It was an opportunity to see the conditions that Jews faced before they died.

Appendix III.

The interview protocol

1. How did you deal with the experience we had at the site of Memory?
2. Which contemporary aspects of our society refer to the concepts that directly or indirectly give prominence to the existence of Auschwitz?
3. What was the impact of this programme on the group as well as on the school community?