



Overview

The students at Moriah School in Wellington collected 1.5 million buttons, which represented the number of children killed in the Holocaust during the Second World War. This article reports on their reasons for doing this and the methods they used to gather the buttons. The students learnt about the personal impact of the Holocaust and designed a memorial to the children who died.

The themes of remembering the past, learning from history, and passing knowledge on for future generations are conveyed through the actions of the pupils and the stories they uncovered as people sent them buttons that had special significance.

The article contains background information about the Holocaust

but also assumes a lot of prior knowledge about the Second World War. Before reading, ensure the students have already encountered the main information and concepts, in particular the history of the Holocaust: when, where, and why it happened.

Be sensitive to the experiences and feelings of any students whose families have experienced relocation because of war or similar events: it may not be appropriate to bring the discussion into the present or recent past.

Texts related by theme

“Spitfires from Tonga” SJ 3.1.09 | “The Gestapo’s Most Wanted” SJ 4.2.09 | “Boy Soldiers” SJ 4.3.08

Text characteristics from the year 7 reading standard

sentences that vary in length, including long, complex sentences that contain a lot of information

adverbial clauses or connectives that require students to make links across the whole text

illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs, containing main ideas that relate to the text’s content

At first, the students thought they’d never be able to collect 1.5 million buttons. It seemed an impossible task. How would people find out about their project? Who would care enough to send buttons to the school? They decided to first brainstorm ideas about how to publicise their project – and then to devise a plan to put into action. “We made posters and put them around Wellington,” says Kessem. “We gave presentations and got stories in the media. We designed and built a website (www.moriahbuttons.wikispaces.com) and posted our stories and video clips on it. We also told the local Jewish community about the project so that people could spread the word to family and friends overseas.”

It wasn’t long before parcels of buttons and letters flooded into the school. Some people sent just one button along with the story behind the button. Other people donated twenty buttons, fifty buttons, a hundred buttons – one person even gave six hundred buttons. They came from all over New Zealand as well as from Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, the United States, France, and Poland.

Like his classmates Liza and Kessem, Zain has been involved with the project since the beginning. His family donated buttons that came from Indonesia. “My mum is from Indonesia, and when we were visiting her family there, my aunts gave us a whole pile for the collection.”

One woman, who sent buttons to the school that had belonged to her mother, wrote: “My mother was an orphan brought out from Poland to Wellington with other Jewish children, just before the Second World War broke out ... Mum’s four brothers and sisters all perished in the Holocaust back in Poland, and so these buttons have special significance.”

Buttons from around the world

Another letter came from a woman in Norway. Although she and her family weren’t Jewish, her parents took part in the Norwegian resistance movement which fought against the German invasion of Norway in 1940. “Here are eighty-eight buttons representing the eighty-eight Jewish children deported from Norway during the Holocaust. They have all belonged to my family,” she wrote.

Some of the buttons came from soldiers’ uniforms. One button belonged to John Paton, who was gassed in the trenches during the First World War. A woman who was close to the family wrote, “After the war, John emigrated from Scotland to New Zealand with his wife, Grace, and small daughter ... After John died, Grace gave me this button to keep safe. I have given it a lot of thought, and

I would like you all now to have it. You must promise me to take very special care of it because this button has seen a lot of wartime action. This is a great family treasure, which I give to your safe keeping.”

Not surprisingly, the students are very attached to the buttons – almost as if they were friends – but this didn’t stop them from feeling pleased when the counting was over. “There was always a big box of buttons in the classroom that had to be dealt with,” Yannai recalls. “Whenever we had five minutes to spare, we would count them. Sometimes we took them home to count, and sometimes our parents helped. When we finally got to 1.5 million buttons, we felt really happy and satisfied. We had a button party with the Jewish community to celebrate.”

words and phrases with multiple meanings that require students to know and use effective word-solving strategies to retain their focus on meaning

academic and content-specific vocabulary

metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation

Possible curriculum contexts

SOCIAL SCIENCES

LEVEL 4 – Social studies: Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.

ENGLISH (Reading)

LEVEL 4 – Ideas: Show an increasing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

LEVEL 4 – Ideas: Select, develop, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

Possible reading purposes

- To find out how a group of young people chose to remember the past
- To understand how small items can gain great significance for individuals, families, and societies
- To learn more about the Holocaust and its consequences.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

Possible writing purposes

- To research and write about a past event that continues to be important in my family or culture
- To write about an item (or items) that has significance for my family or community.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words and phrases, including “Holocaust”, “memorial”, “circle of life”, “concentration camps”, “persecuted”, “Jewish”, “gypsies”, “homosexuals”, “considered”, “inferior”, “appalling conditions”, “episode”, “publicise”, “devise”, “presentations”, “brought out from”, “perished”, “significance”, “resistance movement”, “invasion”, “deported”, “gassed”, “trenches”, “emigrated”, “surprisingly”, “attached”, “recalls”, “pressure”, “divorce”, “orphanage”, “imprisoned”, “evacuated”, “suitcase”, “temporary visas”, “boarding”, “hostels”, “designing”, “Bewilderment”, “Star of David”, “trickling”, “maze”, “plaque”, “focus”, “prejudice”, “racists”
- The use of connotation and words with more than one meaning, including “concentration”, “posted”, “perished”, “resistance”, “deported”, “attached”, “plaque”
- The use of metaphors and similes, including “rounded up like cattle”, “parcels ... flooded into”, “like getting an enormous chocolate”, “turn a blind eye”, “has opened their eyes”
- Personification: “this button has seen a lot of war-time action”.

Possible supporting strategies

Ensure the students have already encountered the main information and concepts in this article, in particular the vocabulary related to the Holocaust. For example, you could provide small groups with pictures or video clips. Ask them to research (using dictionaries) related vocabulary and then present their picture or video clip and their vocabulary to the class.

Make a concept map to record words students would expect to find in an article about the Holocaust, adding any words they will meet for the first time, such as “persecuted”, “perished”, and “resistance”.

Check for students’ understanding of the words, for example, by grouping words pertaining to moving from one place to another into positive or negative (for example, “brought out”, “deported”, and “emigrated”).

Spend time exploring words that have more than one meaning (“attached”) and/or particular connotations (“concentration”) when used in certain contexts.

English language learners, in particular, need to maximise the usefulness of the time they spend on learning and acquiring vocabulary because they are trying to “catch up” with the level they need for mainstream learning. Offer students guidance on which words to prioritise for learning. For example, “prejudice” is likely to be higher frequency and therefore more useful to most students than “gypsy”. The *English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has some useful information about learning vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Background knowledge of the Holocaust
- Understanding of the impact that catastrophic events can have on families, cultures, and countries
- Knowledge of Jewish culture, specifically the Star of David symbol and the history of persecution and prejudice
- Knowledge of oral histories and how they are used to carry stories down the generations
- Experiences of collecting items (or money) for a purpose, including fund-raising.

Possible supporting strategies

For English language learners, the information and concepts will be challenging. Provide opportunities for students to explore them in their first language.

Use other articles, stories, books, movies, and so on to build and/or activate prior knowledge and support students to engage in discussions about the Holocaust.

Help the students make connections between the Holocaust and other instances they know where persecution and racism have driven people from their homes.

Explore concepts of cultural significance and how and why people pass on aspects of their culture and heritage. Support students to share examples from their own families and cultures.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- Text boxes that provide additional factual information
- Photographs, including captioned historical photographs
- A labelled map
- Pull-out quotes that highlight key ideas
- Multiple time frames
- Language signalling time
- A wide range of sentence structures.

Possible supporting strategies

Work with the students to “read” the map and the meaning of the labels. Relate these to the parts of the article where each country is mentioned.

To support the students with the sequence of events and the time markers, you could use a graphic organiser to note each activity, when it occurs, and where. In doing this, the students need to identify and understand the time markers. If appropriate, you could start creating lists of language to show time, including examples from the text. Use these lists to refer to when working with future texts and to help students use this language in their writing.

Instructional focus – Reading

Social Sciences (Level 4 – Social studies: Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.)

English (Level – Ideas: Show an increasing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.)

Text excerpts from “Buttons”

Students (what they might do)

Imagine a mountain of buttons – 1.5 million, to be exact – all different colours, shapes, and sizes. That is the number of children killed in the Holocaust during the Second World War, and that is the number of buttons the students at Moriah School in Wellington have collected over two years.

Students prepare for reading by reviewing their prior knowledge of the Holocaust. They ask questions about the relevance of the buttons in the article. They visualise the collection of buttons and, based on their prior knowledge and the information in the text, infer that the Moriah School children wanted to have a symbol of the young lives lost. They form hypotheses about how the children will collect buttons and what they may do with them as they read on.

One woman, who sent buttons to the school that had belonged to her mother, wrote: “My mother was an orphan brought out from Poland to Wellington with other Jewish children, just before the Second World War broke out ... Mum’s four brothers and sisters all perished in the Holocaust back in Poland, and so these buttons have special significance.”

Students use their knowledge of sentence structure to follow the sentence, identifying the punctuation that indicates clauses, speech, pauses, and relationships. They synthesise the information in the sentence with ideas from the rest of the text to understand why these buttons were donated.

The students ask and answer questions as they read, wondering why the woman’s mother was sent to New Zealand, why her brothers and sisters were not sent, and how the woman came to have her mother’s buttons.

The Nazis persecuted and murdered Jewish people ... because the Nazis considered them to be “inferior”.

Another letter came from a woman in Norway. Although she and her family weren’t Jewish ... which fought against the German invasion of Norway in 1940.

Because her mother was Jewish ... he ignored pressure from the Nazis to divorce his wife. Vera’s mother was sent to Terezin concentration camp.

The students locate, evaluate, and synthesise information across the text (also drawing on their prior knowledge of the Second World War) to infer the impact of the Nazis on all people across Europe, whether they were Jewish or not.

Students identify the relationships within and between the generations, inferring, for example, that Vera’s father was not Jewish and the Nazis did not want him to have a Jewish wife.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT the students to review (with a partner) everything they know about the Holocaust.

- How are you making connections between the text and what you already know?

PROMPT the students to ask questions as they read.

- Remember that a good strategy is to ask questions in your mind as you read.
- What are you wondering about the buttons?
- What hypotheses or inferences are you starting to make? How are you doing this?

DIRECT the students to turn to a partner and unpack the sentence.

- Explain how you read this, taking turns to point out how you used the word meanings, the punctuation, and your knowledge of sentence structure.
- What does the word “perished” mean? Why do you think she didn’t simply say “died”?
- Share with your partner any questions that the text raises. Do you think they will be answered in the text? If not, how else could you find answers?

To support students who find complicated sentences challenging, you could break the sentence into phrases and clauses. Identify the meaning of each phrase and clause and the relationships between them. In particular, prompt students to identify the subjects of each verb and what each pronoun refers to (for example, “who” refers to “one woman”).

Ask the students to summarise their understanding of the text so far.

- What can you infer about the importance of the students’ project to other people?
- Why do you think the students wanted to build a memorial? What purpose do memorials serve?

MODEL your thinking for the students.

- As I read about the people who sent buttons, I’m thinking about all the stories I’ve read about the Holocaust. Reading these individual stories of real people helps me to gain a better understanding of how terrible it must have been. Think of stories you have read, to help your understanding of the article.

ASK QUESTIONS to support the students to make connections within and beyond the text as they synthesise information.

- I can see the impact the Nazis had on the Jewish people. I wonder what impact they had on other people at the time?
- How do you think the Holocaust has impacted on later generations of people, both Jewish and non-Jewish?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- The questions you asked about ... helped you connect ideas in the text with things you had heard, read, or seen elsewhere. Think about how this will help you when you’re reading your group novel.
- By using the punctuation and connecting information as you read, you were able to work out exactly what was happening and what was unusual about the Nazi guard’s actions. Now you know what to do next time you come across a complicated sentence.

METACOGNITION

- Work with a partner to identify places in the text where you made connections with things you had read, seen, or heard before. Discuss your connections and how they helped you to meet your purpose for reading.
- How did you use the fact boxes to extend your understanding of parts of the text?

Reading standard: by the end of year 7

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

Social Sciences (Level 4 – Social studies: Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.)

English (Level 4 – Ideas: Select, develop, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.)

Text excerpts from “Buttons”

THE HOLOCAUST

During the Second World War, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi (National Socialist) Party were in power in Germany.

This episode in history is known as the Holocaust.

“We made posters and put them around Wellington,” says Kessem. “We gave presentations and got stories in the media. We designed and built a website (www.moriahbuttons.wikispaces.com) and posted our stories and video clips on it. We also told the local Jewish community about the project so that people could spread the word to family and friends overseas.”

What struck the students the most about Vera was how positive she was. “She kept on saying how lucky she was and told stories about the people who’d helped her,” Zain recalls. “She told us about a gypsy who gave her an apple when she was in the orphanage and how special that was. For us, an apple is normal food, but for Vera, it was like getting an enormous chocolate.”

Examples of text characteristics

FACT BOXES

Writers sometimes provide additional or background information in a separate fact box. This allows the main text to flow while helping the reader to understand more about a particular idea or event.

LISTS

Lists can be presented in different ways, from a bulleted or numbered list to a list written in full sentences. The format used needs to match the style and purpose of the text.

ANECDOTES

Using anecdotes can give readers insight and help them to make connections with their own experiences.

Teacher

(possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT the students to consider their writing intentions.

- What is your purpose for writing on this topic? Do you want to inform, persuade, entertain, explain, describe, or instruct?
- How do you want your readers to feel?
- What do you want your audience to know about or understand? Why?

Discuss ways of developing ideas.

- How have you decided what information to include and what to leave out?
- Think about your key ideas and identify the information that develops each idea and the information that gives background to the idea.
- How can you use all this information without overloading the reader?

EXPLAIN that one way to provide background information is to insert a fact box. Other options used in this text are a timeline, maps, and a summary of facts.

MODEL the way a list can be written.

- As I read, I counted the different things the children did. There are seven activities here, and they’re written in four full sentences. Each of the first three sentences has just two activities in it, making the list easy to follow. Another way to list items is to make them separate bullet points. For this article, the full sentences fit with the style of the article.

PROMPT the students to consider how they might present information in their own writing.

- Think about why you need to list information and what kind of items you’re recording.
- What is the purpose? What format will best meet your purpose?
- Remember to keep your purpose, audience, and overall style in mind as you make decisions when you’re writing. Look at models from other texts if you’re not sure how to set out a list.

PROMPT the students to review their writing, looking for places where adding an anecdote could improve the meaning or impact.

- What do you want your readers to know and understand?
- How can you help your readers by adding a personal detail, a comparison, or an anecdote?
- Ask a partner to read your work before and after. Do the changes make a difference? In what way?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- Taking that information out of the main text and putting it into a separate fact box is a big improvement. I can now read the main text without getting confused by too much information.
- Including an example of your gran’s fussiness helped me to understand why you felt impatient with her. An example or anecdote is often more effective than a long description.

METACOGNITION

- Tell me about the strategies you used as you made decisions about the amount and placement of information in your article. What impact did you want the information to have?
- I noticed you used a set of criteria to select your ideas for writing. Was this an effective strategy for planning and researching?

Writing standard: by the end of year 7
The Literacy Learning Progressions