

‘Your school needs you to buy a poppy’: Dominance and fragility in school remembrance practices

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'Your School Needs You to Buy a Poppy': Dominance and fragility in school remembrance practices

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Abstract

Generated by the centenary of the First World War, there has been an increased interest in how war is commemorated in English schools. Whilst other authors have argued that the way in which remembrance is marked in schools is militarised and nationalistic, this article reports on a single school case study to provide a deeper discussion of how this is reproduced in everyday practices and a consideration of how alternative forms of remembrance are resisted. Butler's concept of 'grievability' is deployed to interpret the practices where some lives are privileged above others in commemoration creating a militarised 'red poppy remembrance discourse'. I go on to argue that this discourse, although dominant, is also fragile in nature and attempts to counter this are treated with suspicion to maintain nationalistic and war-normalising messages for the next generation.

Keywords

First World War, fragility, memory, militarism, remembrance

Introduction

As 11th November (Remembrance Day) approaches each year, red poppies appear across the United Kingdom in public and private spaces, with schools as no exception. A two-minute silence is held at 11am to mark the time the First World War officially ended in 1918. The red poppy is sold on behalf of the Royal British Legion (RBL), who describe themselves as 'lead[ing] the nation in commemorating and honouring those who have served and sacrificed' (Royal British Legion, 2020) and is widely worn by key political and media figures. The Legion denies that the poppies are political, but this is disputed by those who argue the poppy is linked to militarism and nationalism and seeks to sanitise war (Andrews, 2015; Basham, 2016). The centenary of the First World War increased discussion around how war should be remembered in schools, with Aldridge (2014) arguing it is vital that commemorations convey the horrors of warfare. However, this was

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not the approach promoted by the British government, with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, advocating putting young people at the ‘front and centre’ of the commemorations ‘. . . to ensure that the sacrifice and service of a 100 years ago is still remembered in a 100 years’ time’ (Cameron, 2012).

Despite the prominence of the red poppy, there is also a white poppy which represents three elements: ‘remembrance for all victims of war, a commitment to peace and a challenge to attempts to glamorise or celebrate war’ (Peace Pledge Union, 2022). However, these are not part of mainstream remembrance practices with those who wear them often criticised, as are those who do not wear a red poppy (Christoyannopoulos, 2023). 122,385 white poppies were sold in 2018, compared to RBL’s 45 million (Royal British Legion, 2020). There is also a black poppy aiming to elevate ‘missing key historical narratives’ of Black people’s contributions to European wars (Black Poppy Rose, 2021) and a purple poppy to commemorate animal victims of war (Murphy’s Army, 2023).

This article focuses on how the red poppy and its associated remembrance practices occur in schools and examines the messages that are received and reproduced, and the contexts in which this happens. Furthermore, although previous research has been focussed on nationalism and the militarisation of remembrance practices within a First World War context (see Danilova and Dolan, 2020; Pennell, 2016, 2020) less attention has been paid to the remembrance of victims of contemporary conflict during the centenary time period, and remembering in ways that contradict the norm.

Within the above context, this paper explores the discourse that runs through remembrance practices of a large multicultural school in the north of England, pseudonymised as ‘Alderfield’. Following an overview of previous discussion on war remembrance, including in schools, the case-study school is introduced. I then present my concept of the militarised and nationalistic ‘Red Poppy Remembrance Discourse’ (RPRD) and how it establishes who is remembered, and equally, who is forgotten within the school space, both on Remembrance Day and at other times of the year. The article then suggests that despite the RPRD being dominant, it is also fragile in nature and shirks engagement with discussion and debate. Although it is possible to subvert it, this is met with resistance which leads to its reproduction within the geopolitical site of the school.

Contextualising school war remembrance: national approaches and ideologies

Remembering war is constructed through ideological lenses (Hutchinson, 2017; Zembylas, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the cultural and political backdrop encountered by schools in war remembrance, including the nationalistic messages that become intertwined.

Commemoration practices do not stand alone but link into a wider discourse around heritage. Smith (2009) identifies the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (AHD), which she describes as the dominant discourse of the social process of heritage, where certain types of national heritage are preserved and certain messages are naturalised. Smith (2009) explains that heritage sites and objects are props in this discourse and their preservation is deemed necessary for the education of future generations. This concern with reproducing the discourse was especially evident when young people were placed at the front of the First World War commemorations. Furthermore, Smith asserts that the AHD ‘works to propagate a particular vision of history and national and cultural identity and it both includes and excludes as it does’ (p. 4). The red poppy could be considered an example of this. Similarly, it has been suggested that there exist ‘communities of sacrifice’ (Hutchinson, 2017) that feed into nationalistic discourses which can make a critical approach to remembrance more difficult (Danilova, 2015). Furthermore, Andrews (2015) highlights nationalistic associations as a reason why images such as the poppy can prove to be controversial.

Danilova (2015) argues that often soldiers are considered to be ‘hero-victims’; and that the politics of mourning ‘redirects the public attention from the context of modern conflicts, and reintroduces the nationalistic framings of war commemoration’ (p. 277). This can be observed in the mission statements of military charities, which often refer to the nation. Herman and Yarwood (2015) argue military charities lie on the ‘border-zone’ of the military-civilian boundary. As will be seen below, money is raised for such charities in schools, with poppy-selling for the RBL being a notable example.

To understand who is acknowledged with remembrance practices, I use the term ‘grievability’ provided by Butler (2016), who argues that a grievable life is one that is recognised and given personhood and suggests ‘a presupposition for the life that matters’ (p. 14) with those who wage war dividing the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives which can justify the taking of the latter to protect the former (p. 38). Åhäll has employed this concept of grievability, along with Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’ (Butler, 1999), to frame a discussion of militarism which she describes as ‘a normalising process to do with. . .the social and cultural preparation for the idea of war’ (Butler, 2016: 162). She describes remembrance as part of a ‘dance’ that is a ‘choreographed political performance’ (Butler, 2016: 162). This echoes the work of Enloe (200) who describes militarism as ‘creeping’ into daily life with its everyday forms ‘scarcely looking life threatening’ (p. 3). Åhäll (2019) further describes this normalisation as part of ‘Everyday International Relations (IR)’, arguing that it is essential to ‘pay attention to that which is hidden, silenced, embodied, felt, normalised and depoliticised’ (p. 153).

In exploring the nature of militarism, Dodds (2019) advocates examining the role of discourse and ideology, and interactions between the human and the physical at many levels, not just the nation state (p. 5). This position echoes Moiso (2015) who advocated for an analysis of militarism that ‘brings together power, place, “world”, and subjects in unique combinations’ (p. 220). This approach draws attention to the ways in which perceived threats to the ‘social body’ are mobilised to present military power as ‘rational’ (Basham, 2018), and the ways in which everyday objects, bodies and domestic spaces are used in military recruitment (Rech, 2020). Poppies themselves have been considered through this geopolitical lens by Basham (2016), who argues that the annual poppy appeal relies on ‘communities of feeling’ which are gendered and racialised (p. 890).

Schools have also been identified as geopolitical sites, due to their formal mobilisation by the state as institutions serving national security interests and their informal role as social spaces where teachers and students ‘rework, contest, and/or acquiesce to these geopolitical manoeuvres’ (Lizotte and Nguyen, 2020: 921). In this article I intend to explore the ways in which these concepts of grievability and militarism inform a discourse of remembrance, and to describe the everyday practices through which students and staff engage with the physicality of the school and remembrance artefacts to reproduce this discourse of remembrance.

Remembrance practices in schools

The First World War centenary period of 2014–2018 generated a surge of discussion regarding remembrance practices in schools. Leading up to the anniversary, Aldridge (2014) questioned how war should be remembered in schools, stating that portraying war as ‘horrific’ was the only morally acceptable strategy, and that ‘educators should consider, for example, replacing associations with bright red flowers, pristine stone memorials, and elderly men wearing medals, with images or narratives of children killed or wounded in war’ (p. 6). Research carried out during the centenary period, including that reported here, suggests that this approach was largely disregarded by schools. Haight et al. (2021) note that the schools in their study emphasised ‘tradition’ and when previously ‘invisible participants’, such as those which reflected some schools’ communities, were included,

this was an addition rather than a replacement of the tradition (p. 13). Pennell (2020) described the government funded excursions to the battlefields as part of a process of militarisation associated with remembrance, due to the presence of current and recently-serving soldiers, with the narratives of ‘sacrifice, duty and loyalty’ emphasised (Pennell, 2018: 93). She also explained that the ‘memory messages’ communicated in the classroom means that lessons can ‘slip into remembrance’ without a chance for critical thinking (Pennell, 2016: 55). In a study in Scottish schools, Danilova and Dolan (2020) also state that such commemoration can normalise war for students by learning a soldier-centric personalisation of conflict.

Writing about the Falkland Islands, Benwell (2014) discusses how nationalism is transmitted through teaching about the conflict in the classroom, and argues that in order to understand these disciplinary mechanisms ‘only a situated perspective on geopolitical discourses can tease out how geopolitical subjectivation works on the ground, how it produces docile bodies and where it fails to do so, how it replicates the official discourse, and where it diverges from it’ (pp. 53–54). Although learning about and remembering war within English schools does not occur in the same context as the Falklands, this still holds true. This article will critically examine the discourse surrounding the ‘red poppy’ approach to remembrance whilst considering the school as a site where state geopolitical aims are implemented and also negotiated (Lizotte and Nguyen, 2020). By carrying out a case study, I was able to observe ‘on the ground’ how the school was situated as part of these mechanisms including who was remembered, and why.

Methods

The aim of the overall project was to better understand how peace and war are taught in schools during the First World War centenary period. The specific aspect reported in this article was to examine how remembrance practices contributed to this. I visited the case-study school around 15 times between November 2015 and July 2016, after receiving university ethics approval. During this time, I carried out 10 semi-structured interviews with teaching staff, including the headteacher; one semi-structured interview with a sixth-former (aged 18); and two focus groups, one with three sixth-formers (aged 17–18) and another with 2 years 10 students (aged 14–15). These students opted-in after I visited their classes and told them about my research. Focus groups were chosen to increase the comfort level of the participants and to go some way to redress the power imbalance between researcher and participants (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). I also collected data through document analysis of school resources such as lesson plans, and through the analysis of images and photos from the school website as well as classroom and corridor displays. I kept fieldnotes whilst in the school and a diary to encourage self-reflection. The data was analysed thematically, based on the framework provided by Braun and Clarke (2006), whilst bearing in mind the social and global context of the research (Mullet, 2018).

The case study method was chosen as it provides a way to ‘get close to reality’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 133). It allowed me to examine a complex issue in a deeper way by painting a clearer picture of the activities in one school, rather than gaining a surface understanding of several. The case study method has received criticism due to a perceived lack of rigour and validity, and the inability to generalise, although this has been countered by theorists who argue that this is not the main aim of case study research, and a focus on this can ‘inhibit or even extinguish the curiosity and interpretation that should be at the heart of inquiry’ (Thomas, 2016: 69) and that a focus on formal generalisation can mean that the ‘force of example is underestimated’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 228). In this study, I do not attempt to generalise to wider populations, but provide an insight into the practices of one school.

The case study school is a larger-than-average comprehensive in northern England with a mixed intake, mainly consisting (in roughly equal numbers) of those from a White British background

and those with Pakistani heritage, most of whom are Muslim. It was chosen in part because it was a 'good example' (Thomas, 2016) of a fairly typical urban school in the area due to its intake, and because I was aware that they had had an event to mark the First World War centenary, including the unveiling of their own memorial, which indicated they would be able to provide me with data on the subject of remembrance. In this article I mention some participants by their pseudonyms. These include 'Sam', an English teacher who was a former soldier in the British army; 'Fred' a history teacher; 'Mel' and 'Johnny', religious studies teachers; 'Jocelyn', a health and social care teacher; 'Lucas' a geography teacher; and 'Oliver', a humanities teacher.

The red poppy remembrance discourse at Alderfield School

On the history classroom door at Alderfield there was a poster that read 'Your School Needs You to Buy a Poppy'. This echoed the famous First World War recruitment poster of Lord Kitchener pointing at the viewer saying, 'Your Country Needs You'. The poster still featured Kitchener but now the message is to the members of the school community. It was on the door year-round, making remembrance something that stretched beyond the confines of 'remembrance season'. The poster, which has been described as making a demand to the addressee as 'a moral right, based on patriotism' (van Leeuwen, 2004: 7), seems to be creating such a demand of the school's students, making the buying of a poppy seem like a command. In this section, I suggest that dominance of the poppy and associated remembrance practices creates and maintains a narrow, militarised, nationalistic discourse of remembrance, which I call 'Red Poppy Remembrance Discourse' (RPRD), into which members of the school are expected to assimilate.

Centenary commemorations at Alderfield

In 2014, Alderfield School created a memorial next to the school entrance to commemorate the centenary of the First World War, with a ceremony to unveil it. The memorial, which was created by staff and students in the history and technology departments, had wooden cut-outs of First World War-style rifles stood at either side of the centre point, which hosted a wreath of poppies. Both sides of the path leading up to the wreath featured First World War soldiers' helmets, and a carpet of poppies was intended to mimic a display called 'Blood Swept Land and Seas of Red' at the Tower of London, which saw 888,246 ceramic poppies placed around the Tower, each representing a British or Commonwealth soldier killed in the First World War. Lining this path was barbed wire, such as would have been seen on the top of the trenches.

There was also a board displaying what the headteacher described as 'photos of all the soldiers that were lost in Iraq and Afghanistan'. This brings the garden 'up to date' and does not just represent a war long ago, as a project based around the First World War centenary may seemingly do. However, Iraq and Afghanistan were recent, controversial invasions that created much debate and many large-scale protests both nationally and internationally. The juxtaposition of rifles from 100 years ago with these photos does not consider that the nature of warfare has changed, effectively blurring past and present wars. By associating contemporary wars with those of long ago, the memorial goes some way to justify them by minimising the potential damage to civilian life (Basham, 2016; Danilova, 2015). Current soldiers and their actions are moved into a historical context where the dead are considered conscripted 'fallen heroes'. This discourages a critical, educational engagement with the consequences of war.

It is notable that the memorial has been constructed as a new project. In many older schools, there are memorials to the 'old boys' and teachers who died during the world wars. These will have been standing for decades and may be considered part of the history of the school, with the dead

directly connected to them. However, Alderfield was founded in the latter half of the 20th Century and so does not have that institutional connection to the dead of the world wars. The creation of this memorial could have been a chance to ‘unthink remembrance’ (Kidd and Sayner, 2018), creating a different narrative. However, by reproducing an ‘official’ memorial displayed at the Tower of London, the RPRD is reproducing a specific set of social and cultural values. Writing on heritage, Smith (2009) says it is ‘a process of negotiating historical and cultural meanings and values that occur around the decisions we make to preserve or not certain physical places or objects and the way these are then managed’ (p. 6). By deciding to preserve particular symbols unquestioningly, such as the poppy, the school is maintaining historical narratives which reproduce a specific identity reflecting the national model. Who is remembered and how is reflected in reproducing a nationalistic and militarised association with war remembrance in the school. Here, within the space of the school, national discourse is being reproduced, perpetuating remembrance messages with a military focus in a concrete form.

The ceremony that unveiled the memorial was spoken about enthusiastically by the headteacher:

we had an absolutely packed hall, with everybody from Key Stage 3¹ in there, historians, the GCSE and A-Level historians in there. Lots of local dignitaries, local councillors, the local MP, governors, friends of the school. . . and James, who is our site superintendent, was in the Paras, served in the Falklands. So he dressed up in his army fatigues and came down and laid a big wreath - it was, it was absolutely fantastic. All in absolute silence at the end, with five or six hundred people in the hall.

By focussing on the soldiers, in both the memorial and the ceremony, civilians are overlooked, showing who is deemed worthy of remembering and grieving. Only red poppies feature, with the white ‘peace’ poppy noticeably absent. Representatives of the charities supported by the school also attended, which were ‘Blind Veterans UK’ and ‘Blesma: the Limbless Veterans’. These have nation-focussed mission statements and state that they assist those who were injured ‘in the honourable service of our country’ (Blesma, 2023) and believing that ‘no one who has served our country should battle blindness alone’ (Blind Veterans, 2021). The choosing of these charities is telling as to the focus of who is remembered, replicating a militarised discourse. For instance, organisations supporting children in warzones, such as War Child or UNICEF, were not chosen. As mentioned above, it is suggested that such military charities lie on the ‘border-zone’ of the military-civilian boundary (Herman and Yarwood, 2015). I suggest that by selling poppies and raising money for these charities, schools also place themselves in the border-zone, which could be considered a military invasion into a civilian space. As school attendance is generally a legal requirement, students could be considered a captive audience. This is particularly significant, with the affective dimension of such a militaristic discourse providing the means of normalising violent conflict (Zembylas, 2023).

Students at Alderfield are praised by the staff for remembering in line with the RPRD, especially during the silence, with its repeated performance contributing to the replication of the discourse. Mel remarked that ‘we don’t really have problems with students refusing to observe the silence which does happen at some schools’ and Fred explained that:

every group that I’ve done it with . . . have always been 100% spot on. Everyone’s really really quiet. There’s no talking there’s no noisemaking, it’s been really really really really good. I’ve not had to tell anyone off. Nothing. They seem to get it, you know, for whatever reason, whatever is driving them, they just do, it’s never been a problem.

By considering the students ‘good’ for remaining silent, the RPRD is reinforced, and the assimilation to the expectations of this discourse plays a large part in explaining the ‘reason’. Here, the

'technologies' of commemoration are evident, with the discourse preceding the subjects that enact it (Brown, 2012: 238).

The RPRD was also evident in instructions given to students before they performed the silence when I visited the school for Remembrance Day in 2015. A voice on the loudspeaker reminded them to 'remember what they [soldiers] have done for us and shaped the future of our country. This is in World War One, World War Two and many other conflicts. We will celebrate a minute's silence'. Teachers reported providing students with similar messages when telling them who to think about during the silence. Fred told me that he says 'you're gonna think about. . . people who have fought for us, people who have died for us. You can think about conflicts now or conflicts before. You can think about people in the First World War or the Second World War'. Likewise, Jocelyn states they explain to the students that 'it is about people who went to war for us, for our country, the people that have died' although she qualifies this by saying 'whether or not they choose to think about that or something else, it is up to them', granting a degree of autonomy. These messages firmly put British military personnel at the centre of remembrance, mirroring the messages from the RBL which states it is remembering 'those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, in two World Wars and more recent conflicts' (Royal British Legion, 2020), thus setting up a debt of gratitude within the school space. The messages promoted by the school of whom is worthy of grieving reveal how the RPRD prioritises some lives as more grievable than others and means we avoid confronting our violence past, upholding our own colonial 'island fantasy' (Farrell, 2016).

Despite being in the centenary, these messages are not just about First World War. Recent wars are incorporated, and the language used by teachers to the students ties 'us' to these conflicts. As Butler (2106) highlights, 'one way of posing the question of who "we" are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned' (p. 42). By denoting members of the school (and citizens more widely) as the 'us' who have been 'died for', we become responsible for the mourning of those who are emphasised within the practices. This is even more closely linked to young people when Fred, said, 'it's still a case of young people going and sacrificing themselves', talking about contemporary wars.

Above, the headteacher referred to the 'lost lives' of twenty-first century soldiers illustrated the way in which the language reproduced by the RPRD is euphemistic in nature. Terms such as these were used by almost all of the participants throughout the study, including 'sacrifice', 'given lives', and 'fallen', as well as longer phrases such as 'not coming home', 'putting bodies on the line' and paying the 'ultimate price'. Not only do these phrases mask the deaths of these servicepeople, but they portray the soldier as having a passive role in war; removed from acts of violence; the soldier is seen as a protector and not an aggressor. As Basham (2016: 885) states:

Soldiers do of course not 'fall' in battle; they are maimed and they maim; they are eviscerated and they eviscerate; they bleed and make bleed; they are killed and they kill. However, designating soldiers as 'the fallen', and their deaths as sacrifices enables mourning and remembrance to be separated out from military violence.

'Euphemisation' has been identified by Gavriely-Nuri (2014) as part of a 'war-normalising narrative', along with 'naturalisation' and 'justification'. This is relevant to the practices of school remembrance as war is seen as an 'event independent of human agency' and 'just, rational, worthy of support' (p. 125), reinforcing the discourse within the school. Similarly, the red poppy itself could be considered a euphemism. As a symbol it represents the actions and consequences of those who engaged in direct combat in the name of the state. This is then replicated within the school, helping to legitimise war without the need to explicitly condone it. As it is sold uncritically and wearing it is 'encouraged' according to students, it is not seen as problematic within the school.

This masks the horrors of war and leaving them unquestioned, and this lack of criticality is indicative of militarisation (Åhäll, 2016; Enloe, 2000).

Students are similarly praised for wearing poppies, with Oliver stating that they are ‘very good about buying poppies, wearing poppies’. Here, the ‘good student’ is the poppy-wearing student, the silent student. This indicates that students are a potential ‘problem’ if they do not remember in the manner expected. Activity is directed; students are not taking part in remembrance as a choice, but as something expected of them. A sixth-former told me that he ‘obviously’ buys a red poppy, despite saying he himself does not feel a connection to it. The message within the school is that the ‘good’ student buys the poppy and is silent, with the anxiousness about behaving ‘well’ in the silence potentially due to concerns it is actually not meaningful for the students and thus may be disrupted. The continued performance acts undertaken by those within the school fixes a ‘correct’ or ‘common sense’ manner to performing the ‘dance’ of remembrance, when no such natural state exists.

The focus on the world wars in remembrance practices, especially in countries such as England which has had no recent wars on our soil (although our armed forces, of course, have been involved in military violence overseas) could make war seem a historic phenomenon and therefore less relevant. However, as Hutchinson (2017) notes ‘a recent war experience is less significant than the existence of myths of war, myths that have been woven into social and political experience, and that are reinforced by recurring geopolitical threats’ (p. 84). I suggest this is certainly the case in England; the myths of war that glorify death are reproduced by the RPRD as something worthy, heroic, and necessary. With the geopolitical threats surrounding terrorism and tensions within the Middle East, military action and the consequent military and civilian deaths are seen as acceptable. Hutchinson (2017: 51) describes nations as ‘sacred communities of sacrifice’ regarding war and its part in nation-building. He argues that some of the symbols of nationalism are quasi-religious in nature and I suggest that the poppy fulfils this. As will be further discussed, criticism is not seen as acceptable within the confines of the RPRD where the ‘fallen’ and the nation go hand-in-hand and are viewed as sacred.

Remembrance and fundamental British values

The nationalistic element of remembrance is important to explore, especially in a multicultural school such as Alderfield. The headteacher told me that ‘there are opportunities beyond the curriculum for students to raise funds, to celebrate British Values, to acknowledge on a yearly basis [on] Remembrance Day’ and wrote in a school newsletter that he was moved by tutor groups ‘made up of many different faiths and backgrounds, working together to create a Poppy display, and, in turn celebrate strong, core British values. This sense of common belonging is a very powerful one’. Teaching ‘Fundamental British Values’ (FBV) is a requirement for educational establishments under the Prevent duty in schools, a UK government programme which aims to stop the radicalisation of young people (Department for Education, 2015). The duty has been widely criticised for the securitisation of education (O’Donnell, 2016) and has been interpreted by some as being Islamophobic in nature (Jerome et al., 2019). The FBV obligation has been accused of normalising and protecting white privilege (Winter and Mills, 2020) and as intertwined with colonialism (O’Donnell, 2016; Panjwani, 2016). Chadderton (2014) has more directly linked this securitisation to militarisation and argues that it functions in schools to ‘increase acceptance among the population for permanent war’ (p. 418).

In a school with many British Asian students, most of whom are Muslim, this is particularly relevant, and the ethnicity and religion of the students is commented on by the headteacher. He mentions that the student reading out war poetry at the ceremony was Muslim and when referring to a competition to visit the ‘Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red’ installation in London, the headteacher said that

‘the two students that raised the most money through charity were both Asian girls. And that would buck the trend of what you would anticipate there’. He goes on to say (on questioning):

Well, there’s me stereotyping, but what I imagine - but then when I see events on TV, related to remembrance - I don’t remember seeing many Asian girls involved in those, representing or laying wreaths – so. . .I’ve not seen a research paper that says there are X% of Asian girls that. . . but from when I look at, I don’t see them. . .It’s great, it’s very inclusive.

Although he acknowledges that there is a stereotype, the emphasising of the Asian students’ activity appears to be justifying their British identity as the whiteness of the other students is not mentioned. Crawford (2017) argues that the policy to promote FBV is constructing a ‘Muslim other’ within schools and British values are largely white values which are seen as superior to others. She proposes that ‘the British government’s racially biased prescription of “Fundamental British Values” to *treat* the supposed value deficit between the (white British) native over that of the non-native (Muslim other) does little but defend white native superiority and reproduce and reinforce white hegemony’ (p. 202, emphasis original). Here we can see elements of the headteacher’s attitude. The Muslim students are shown to be ‘treated’ by their involvement in remembrance and are no longer ‘other’. The headteacher’s keenness to link Remembrance Day to FBV could also indicate the pressure he may feel to demonstrate that his school conforms to the rituals of the RPRD ‘despite’ its demographic. This indicates that the context of the school can have an effect on how the policy is perceived and enacted (Braun et al., 2011).

Under the RPRD, Muslim students are praised for their conformity to this traditional form of remembrance and a militarised form of Britishness. In the ceremony, Britishness is represented by a military salute from an ex-soldier, the playing of a British military musical call (the Last Post) and the recitation of an arguably nationalistic poem, ‘The Soldier’ by Rupert Brooke. With lines such as ‘there’s some corner of a foreign field, that is forever England’, the poem reinforces the idea of a British person dying somehow purifying the soil. Interestingly, one of the English teachers (Nicola) describes the poem as ‘sounding like something an extremist might say’ when talking about teaching it in class. However, it should be noted that this is only considered when discussing the teaching of war poetry and is not something discussed on Remembrance Day. Representation of the diversity of the student population is only added to the RPRD in a piecemeal fashion, for instance the inclusion of different faith symbols on the otherwise ‘traditional’ monument. However, this does not always translate to who is remembered throughout the year.

Remembering at other times in the year

According to Lucas, there was a petition by students for a silence for those killed during violence in Gaza in 2014, which was not granted. Lucas says he responded to this request by saying ‘that minute’s silence we had [on Remembrance Day] is for all people who have lost their lives in conflict, it isn’t just for British servicemen and it’s important that you understand that’. However, it is unclear if this is also the message he gave to them prior to the silence. If he did not, it is reasonable as to why they had not considered this breadth previously. Oliver also explained to the students that ‘Remembrance Day isn’t just about the First and Second World War, it’s about all victims and conflicts throughout the world and ongoing which they often don’t know. They often just think it’s about World War One or Two’. The suggestion that it is for all victims seems to encompass the Palestinian civilians that they were concerned about. However, when I asked Oliver for clarification about what he meant by ‘all victims’ he explained he meant ‘you are remembering all of the soldiers who have died in conflicts past and present, so it’s not just about World War One and Two, it’s about

Afghanistan and Iraq, etc'. This seemingly contradicts his earlier statement about 'all victims' which seemed to imply civilians, giving a potentially confusing message.

It should also be noted that although the Muslim students are particularly acknowledged for their contribution to remembrance practices at Alderfield, this request of remembrance for a largely Muslim state is not accepted. Farrell (2016) notes that in a securitised British education system, 'the only acceptable Muslim in this discourse is a-political and de-politicised' (p. 2). I argue this is the case here, that as 'red-poppy remembrance' is seen as a-political the input of the Muslim students is welcomed, whereas a potentially political action remembering the deaths of those in Gaza is not.

This question of who is remembered and who is not is also exemplified by the school's silence for those who were killed in terror attacks in France. The headteacher himself acknowledged that they had chosen to mark this and not the attacks that happened in Côte d'Ivoire and Turkey at a similar time. He said that 'it's about when do you make a bigger deal of something' and claims he does so when something 'feels big' which the students may wish to discuss. However, it should be noted the students wanted to discuss what happened in Palestine, but this was overlooked. I suggest this is due to the policing of peripheries of the RPRD. This constructed nationhood can leak beyond some state boundaries due to pan-regional identity, such as in western Europe, although the scope of general European identity is considered particularly contentious, especially concerning Turkey due to criticism by other European Union states as to its EU membership (Dodds, 2019: 107). Here, geopolitical concerns are playing out within the school space as part of 'Everyday IR'.

The fragility of the RPRD

Despite being dominant, the RPRD is fragile in nature. By this I mean it is precarious and attempts to disturb it are quashed or ignored. The term 'fragility' here does not mean that the discourse appears vulnerable externally, in fact it is quite the opposite. As argued in the previous sections, the way in which the discourse is repeated and performed perpetuates an established approach to remembrance which is nationalistic and militarised. When using the term fragility, I mean it in much the same way as those writing on 'white fragility' do. According to DiAngelo (2011: 54), white fragility is:

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.

These defence mechanisms can be seen with the RPRD when any attempts to present an alternative to a nationalistic, militaristic remembrance are not considered or shut down. Although, as mentioned above, there are nationalistic and racial undercurrents to the RPRD, I am here taking this concept of fragility to explain how the discourse responds to 'triggers' that provide stressors to its strength regarding the role of the military in society.

DiAngelo argues that these defensive moves can be triggered by people sharing their experiences and simply being provided with information about other groups. An example of a trigger is demonstrated by the dissenting attitude of Sam, the only ex-military teacher at Alderfield. Sam's unusual position of first-hand experience of war is compounded as he is now a supporter of Veterans for Peace, an organisation whose members believe, based on their own experience, that 'war is not the solution to the problems we face in the 21st century' (Veterans for Peace, 2021). He said that although he found the 2014 event very impressive, it did glorify war, however unintentionally. He said, 'there was no mention of the enemy dead, there was no mention of civilian deaths; it was remembering our brave soldiers and it's just the rhetoric about it sometimes niggles a little bit'.

Sam was asked to put on his uniform and march in the ceremony, something he ‘flat-out refused to do’. The military was represented instead by the ex-services caretaker, whose march and placement of the wreath instead complemented what was expected and did not disrupt the discourse. Winter (2008)), writing on historical remembrance, stated ‘the testimony of witnesses needs to be treated with critical respect, precisely as we treat all other aspects of the past’ (p. 12). Although Winter was writing about survivors of human rights violations, the same can be said for Sam: he witnessed (and participated in) recent history yet his assessment of it is unwelcomingly critical and challenges the fragile RPRD.

The inclusion of Sam’s voice in the ceremony would have been an opportunity to provide a different perspective on the military and remembrance. However, this is confined to discussions in his classroom, which I describe elsewhere as a ‘heterotopia’ (Liddle, 2021). Sam’s opinions and reflections on his experience at war posed a potential threat to the stability of the RPRD, creating a silence around alternative perspectives. Sam’s own personal experiences and reflections on returning from war do not align with the discourse nor the way the school (and the wider country) performs remembrance. On white fragility, DiAngelo (2011: 67) says:

White Fragility doesn’t always manifest in overt ways; silence and withdrawal are also functions of fragility. Who speaks, who doesn’t speak, when, for how long, and with what emotional valence are all keys to understanding the relational patterns that hold oppression in place’

Sam was only invited to take part in a way that perpetuated the discourse. A military salute was incorporated, and military charities were invited, thus ensuring this performance of remembrance keeps the relational patterns of militarism in place. This relates to who is and who is not mourned. The language used is based around those who are in the military and fought for the nation. The hierarchy of grievability is a part of these ‘functions of fragility’ and ‘who speaks and who doesn’t speak’. The remembrance of French victims of terrorism over those from Côte d’Ivoire or civilians in Gaza also shows who is sufficiently important to be remembered in the school space.

Sam’s approach to poppy-wearing is also counter to others at Alderfield. He no longer wears a poppy, and he viewed this as a method to engage students. He became uncomfortable with the red poppy and how ‘it’s become just a badge of I don’t really know what and I’m not sure anyone else really does either’. Previously, Sam wore a white poppy, but he perceived that this caused controversy within the school. Although Sam reports that no one said anything to him directly, and the students were unbothered and mainly curious, however they reported to him that others had said wearing a white poppy ‘was “disgraceful”’. It was “going against our soldiers” that kind of thing which it didn’t mean to me and I was able to tell those kids that’. This is an example of the fragility described by DiAngelo, with guilt and shaming being a response. By wearing first a white poppy and then no poppy, Sam was able to explain his reasoning and model that it was possible to make choices around remembrance, demonstrating that teachers can find ‘practical solutions’ and add ‘plural meanings’ as a means of resistance and agency within the state-influenced school space (Lizotte and Nguyen, 2020: 926). One student I spoke to said she had heard of the white poppy and noticed Sam wearing it in previous years and would consider buying one if she ‘knew more about it’. This exemplifies how opening-up choices on how to remember could be achieved if there was more information around the options.

One reason why the white poppy was not incorporated within the remembrance practices, could be because it has the potential to stimulate debate. There has been controversy when other schools have introduced white poppies, with it being viewed as ‘indoctrination’ (Green, 2017) and ‘disrespectful’ (Jenkins, 2018), with the latter school releasing a statement saying they had ‘infinite pride in our armed services’ (ibid) and although they expressed a wish to explore different views, this

disclaimer was deemed necessary. This is an example of a peace-focus being viewed as controversial and opposed to a dominant discourse of nationalistic remembrance. I suggest that the red poppy is seen as somehow ‘safer’ as it is endorsed by the state, exemplified by politicians’ wearing of it. It is largely not seen as political in the way the white one may be. By not extending discussion beyond the remembrance of soldiers, the school is staying within the discourse of the passive soldier, who dies but does not kill, in the institutional discourse of remembrance. This mirrors the messages seen nationally during ‘remembrance season’. This is also akin to the way in which white fragility manifests, where certain perspectives are seen as being objective and universal (DiAngelo, 2011). Red poppies are seen as neutral, and anything that may threaten the stability of this discourse will involve backlash. This was seen when there was a hostile approach to the labelling of the red poppy as ‘political’ by FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), football’s governing body (Conway, 2017). This could be why such a symbol is regarded warily within the school.

Overall, it is evident that the RPRD and its boundaries are ‘policed’ to a significant extent within the school, to maintain its authority. For instance, Fred expressed the opinion ‘you should mark [the silence] whether or not you agree with it, whether or not you think these wars are right’, continuing what could then be seen as a hollow performance. It should be noted that it is not just Alderfield that has stipulated such practices. Fred also told me that the students are ‘well-drilled’ at primary school to perform the silence. This repetition, often without reflection, displays the preciousness of the ceremony and its function to maintain the discourse.

Conclusion

Remembrance practices within schools have been considered to be nationalistic and militarised (Danilova and Dolan, 2020; Pennell, 2016, 2020) and mirror national commemorations (Haight et al., 2021) despite calls for a greater focus on peace (Aldridge, 2014). The affordances of a case study as an in-depth qualitative method provided powerful insights and allowed me to illustrate how these commemorative practices are actively implemented and how this bundle of ideologies form a ‘red poppy remembrance discourse’, which privileges some lives as more ‘grievable’ (Butler, 2016) than others. This discourse also ignores the acts of violence committed by the British military, both in the world wars and more recent, controversial conflicts in the Middle East, with war being normalised through the language, performances, and practices of remembrance, turning acts of remembrance into quasi-religious services, demanding respect. This is part of what Åhäll (2016) calls the ‘dance of militarisation’. By not challenging the dominant discourse, the message that war is ‘everyday’ and natural continues to persist as the remembrance approaches of the state play out in the classroom.

However, despite its strength, I argue that the RPRD is also fragile in nature. This fragility can be seen when cracks appear when pushing at the edges of the discourse. Just as in DiAngelo’s description of white fragility, when the discourse faces a ‘trigger’, such as alternative way of remembering (white poppies) or a different group to remember (Palestinians), there are reactions, such as the shutting down of voices. By centring military charities and traditional commemoration practices, the ‘common sense’ notion of remembrance is maintained, one that is largely viewed as ‘non-political’. If the RPRD were truly robust, it would not need to deploy such actions to avoid engaging with discussion, debate, and alternatives to this form of remembrance.

Although the RPRD is strong, Foucault (1978) reminds us ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (p. 95). When viewing schools as geopolitical sites, Lizotte and Nguyen (2020) advocate taking an ‘outward looking’ approach, arguing that schools can ‘remake, and contest the state’s geopolitical agenda’ (p. 934), providing other possibilities for remembrance. In this regard, we might note that in 2020 the PPU reported they had sent quadruple the number of white poppy packs

to schools compared to the year before, from 59 to 280. Whilst this is still a drop in the ocean compared to the ubiquity of the red poppy, it does suggest there remains a possibility for doing things differently. Just as Farrell (2016) argues that challenging the discourse of Preventing Violent Extremism needs the strengthening of relationships between those within and outside of schools, I suggest the same can be said for challenging the RPRD. If schools are to open-up remembrance practices to encompass all of those affected by conflict, this will need cooperation between school-based practitioners, charities/voluntary organisations and those in academia to get the ball rolling. We could then see members of school communities engaging with remembrance as a way to educate about peace and conflict, rather than uncritically promoting a militarised and nationalistic discourse.

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Note

1. Key Stage three students in the English Education system are 11–14. GCSE students are typically 14–16 and A-level students are 16–18.

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