

'I cannot allow myself to focus on a single form of intolerance': Student health professionals' encounters with antisemitism in schools

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Abstract

Swedish society faces a concern regarding growing and multifaceted antisemitism. This is evident in schools, with indications of antisemitic views and expressions among students. However, little is known about how school professionals handle antisemitism. This study explores antisemitism from the perspective of professionals in student health teams. It focuses on the encounters with antisemitism in their daily practice and their interpretative repertoires for positioning themselves as professionals counteracting antisemitism. To accomplish this, 12 representatives of student health teams in two upper secondary schools in Sweden were interviewed. Analysis of the data gathered describe these professionals' encounters with antisemitism in school settings and how they account for their not being involved in preventative or interventional work because of their professional role and conceptualisation of the problem. Furthermore, antisemitism is recognised only when there are potential Jewish victims or potential Muslim perpetrators.

Keywords

Antisemitism, student health teams, Swedish schools, discursive psychology analysis

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Introduction

The title of this article showcases an approach to antisemitism, wherein it is considered intolerance, adopted by members of student health teams in Swedish schools. Although antisemitism has complex and multifaceted implications, there is neither a singular perspective on how it should be characterised (Goldberg et al., 2021, see also e.g. Beller, 2007; Judaken, 2008, 2018; Nirenberg, 2013) nor a universally agreed-upon or unifying definition of the term (cf., IHRA, 2016; JDA, 2021). Antisemitism can be defined as hatred and hostility toward Jews on racial, religious and cultural grounds; it also encompasses cultural conceptions and constructs that have little to do with Judaism, and which may operate in environments where Jews are not actually present (Fein, 1987; Nirenberg, 2013). As a social phenomenon, it is contextually dependent, manifesting in various forms and at different levels (Elukin, 2021; Judaken, 2008, 2018). While antisemitism is commonly associated with the Holocaust, this prejudice has evolved over millennia – from ancient Egypt to present day – conceptually generating a critical discourse within research that focuses on continuities, discontinuities and adaptability to new circumstances in modern contexts (Weiser, 2021). Today, antisemitism arises from multiple sources and in various forms, often intertwined with global events and intensified by social media. These forms include Holocaust denial and distortion, conspiracy theories suggesting a Jewish plot threatening society and criticism of Israel that crosses into antisemitic tropes against Jews as a collective (Beller, 2007; Judaken, 2008). Opposition to the state of Israel and Zionism is usually covered by the term antizionism and is then perceived as a reflexive secular political position (Loeffler, 2021). However, some scholars also argue that antizionism can be regarded as a reconfiguration of antisemitism and ‘the Jewish question’ (e.g. Fine and Spencer, 2017; Seymore, 2019), especially if anti-Jewish tropes and motifs are integrated into campaigns against Israel and Zionism (Weiser, 2021).

An ongoing debate among scholars is whether antisemitism, as a social phenomenon, should be considered a form of racism or seen as a unique phenomenon with its own distinct characteristics and expressions (e.g. Elukin, 2021; Judaken, 2018; Stögner, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2024). In this article, we primarily draw on arguments suggesting that antisemitism should be understood both in terms of its specific features and as related to other forms of racism (Stögner, 2020; Wagrell, 2022). As Stögner (2020) argues: ‘...we will fail to grasp its complexity if we see it *only* as a form of racism; but we will not understand it if we do not *also* recognise it as a form of racism’ (para. 2). However, the emphasis may vary; in some contexts, it may be viewed as related to racism, whereas in others, the focus may be on the traits that distinguish it as a phenomenon.

According to the Jewish congregation in Stockholm, there are 15,000–20,000 Jews living in Sweden, constituting 0.19% of the population. Jews are recognised as a national minority in Sweden, and the Yiddish language is one of five official national minority languages. Despite the sparse Jewish population, antisemitism is a growing, multifaceted concern in Swedish society, and there have been reports of antisemitic expressions among students in schools. In the general media, attention has been drawn to antisemitic statements and practices in different settings, and hatred against people of Jewish backgrounds. Several national surveys have documented antisemitic views among young people (e.g. Bachner and Bevelander, 2021; Bevelander and Hjerm, 2015). Additionally, studies have identified ambiguities and challenges in schools – among students, teachers and other school personnel – regarding the understanding of and lack of knowledge about antisemitism as both a historical and contemporary phenomenon (Katzin, 2021; Wagrell, 2022). Furthermore, contemporary antisemitism among students in Swedish schools has been addressed in a political context. In 2022, the Swedish Government complemented the 2016 national plan to combat racism with an action plan that included strategies directed at countering antisemitism

([Swedish Government, 2016, 2022](#)). In this plan, antisemitism is considered a structural phenomenon, referring to the ways by which antisemitism is woven into the fabric of society, influencing laws, institutions and cultural norms. While potentially easier to overlook than interpersonal acts of antisemitic abuse, it has long-term effects on how Jews are treated and perceived.

After World War II, following the 1946 School Commission report suggesting major reforms in the educational system ([Swedish Government Official Reports, 1948](#)), Swedish schools have been instructed to prepare young people for active participation in a democratic society. The democratic mission is obligatory for all school professionals; teachers, counsellors, school health practitioners, school librarians and others must counteract any kind of discrimination or intolerance, including antisemitism. The realisation of this goal requires adequate tools to prevent and intervene when ideas of tolerance are challenged. Thus, expressions and manifestations of antisemitism in schools must be documented to develop preventative and counteractive strategies and methods. This article focuses on the student health teams in two schools and their encounters with antisemitism.

In Sweden, every school must have a student health team comprising a special educator, school nurse and counsellor, and often led by the principal. Collaborating with teachers and other staff, this multidisciplinary team aims to assess and address mental, physical or social school-related health problems in a promotive and preventative manner ([Swedish education act, SFS 2010:800, 2010](#)). Thus, the health team plays a vital role in preventing discrimination and dealing with expressions or practices that might be hurtful or offensive to students on an individual or group level; the teams' expertise and knowledge contribute to determining how the problem should be addressed. However, in everyday practice, discursive knowledge and resources are constructed, constituted and re-constructed in historic and social contexts ([Potter and Wetherell, 1987](#)), implying that professional accounts of the problem might vary and potentially challenge the efficiency of the multidisciplinary approach. According to [Larsliden and Nilholm \(2024\)](#), the deficiencies in the operational efficacy of student health teams indicate that leadership, time, trust and visibility are vital. If such aspects are neglected, health teams predominantly adopt a reactive approach, addressing issues only after they have manifested, rather than proactively engaging in promotive and preventative measures.

The aim of this article is twofold: to examine how professionals in the schools' student health teams account for antisemitism and how they position themselves as professionals handling the problem. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do professionals in student health teams talk about their encounters with antisemitism?
- RQ2: How do student health team professionals account for their engagement with students to counteract antisemitism in school?

Previous research

As previously stated, antisemitism is a growing multifaceted concern in many societies. However, research on antisemitism in education is limited. A systematic scoping review conducted by [Pistone et al. \(2021\)](#) on studies published between 1945 and 2020 sought to evaluate educational interventions and outcomes for counteracting antisemitism; however, countering antisemitism through teaching was scarcely represented. A search of 19 international bibliographic databases yielded a sample of only 37 publications. Despite this scarcity, the report revealed that antisemitism is mainly approached in the context of teaching and learning about the Holocaust (TLH). Further, in the studies reviewed in [Pistone et al. \(2021\)](#), antisemitism is often viewed as isolated expressions of intolerance among individual students or as a form of racism. Consequently, the primary focus of

TLH is not on preventing and addressing antisemitism but rather on tackling xenophobia and homophobia, or on the promotion of citizenship. Furthermore, discussions on contemporary antisemitism are uncommon in teaching practices. This underscores the problematic perception of antisemitism as a historical issue rather than a relevant concern in modern societies. Therefore, the studies reviewed in [Pistone et al. \(2021\)](#) indicate that antisemitism is not recognised as a distinct structural problem requiring systematic intervention.

Antisemitism has been a neglected field in the Swedish context, with only a few historical studies addressing this phenomenon ([Kvist Geverts, 2020](#)). In a political science study, [Persson \(2022\)](#) discussed antisemitic statements and manifestations in relation to the 'Israel-Palestine conflict',¹ identifying a recurring pattern: when the conflict escalates, antisemitism is triggered and increases in Sweden. This finding is corroborated by [Katzin \(2021\)](#) in a study of Swedish schools in Malmö, which concluded that the 'Israel-Palestine conflict' serves as a catalyst for antisemitic expressions among students. Conversely, [Wagrell \(2022\)](#) revealed that professionals in Stockholm schools do not consistently perceive antisemitic expressions in connection with the 'Israel-Palestine conflict'. According to Wagrell, a possible explanation for this contradiction is that the segregation between the Jewish minority and individuals of Middle Eastern origin is greater in Stockholm than in Malmö, resulting in fewer issues in schools related to the conflict. From another perspective, [Adwan et al. \(2021\)](#) reported that Palestinian students in Sweden criticised teachers for focussing more on TLH than on the 'Israel-Palestine conflict' and that negative attitudes towards Jews among the students are more related to cultural background than religious belonging.

Both [Katzin \(2021\)](#) and [Wagrell \(2022\)](#) report a lack of awareness about antisemitism among school staff, with many professionals failing to grasp its significance as a societal issue. They also highlight the knowledge gap among professionals regarding how to address both the conflict and students' expressions. From a norm-critical perspective, [Katzin \(2021\)](#) argues that antisemitic expressions among students in schools should be recognised as a structural problem and understood as a form of racism. [Wagrell \(2022\)](#) similarly suggests the recognition of antisemitism as a structural problem; however, she emphasises the need for a more nuanced understanding that also acknowledges its unique and distinct characteristics. [Wagrell \(2022\)](#) concludes that it is problematic when school professionals view antisemitism primarily as a manifestation of racism and address it only when students of Jewish descent are present. Furthermore, her study participants seemed to understand antisemitism as an un-Swedish problem, related mainly to people of Middle Eastern origin. Overall, the study revealed significant problems with how antisemitism is conceived and explained as a phenomenon that is mainly concerned with foreign history and politics by school professionals. This relates to Chris Gaines's studies of racism in a British context, which show that when school staff perceive racism as being located elsewhere or in another time, it becomes an abstract phenomenon with no visible targets, thereby losing the rationale and motivation to address it ([Gaines, 1987, 2000](#)).

In one of few studies examining school principals' perspectives, [Gross and Rutland \(2014\)](#) analysed how principals perceive antisemitic bullying in Australian school playgrounds. They found that principals tended to underestimate the prevalence of antisemitism by minimising or denying the existence of anti-Jewish sentiments and failed to take reports of children experiencing antisemitism seriously, resulting in a lack of prevention.

To summarise, our brief research survey indicates that school professionals face challenges in comprehending antisemitism as a diverse, complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The development of effective, long-term educational strategies to combat antisemitism requires an understanding of how school professionals conceptualise and address this issue. Our contribution seeks to provide knowledge regarding how school health teams – in their important role as first-line

professionals working with fundamental democratic values and equal treatment issues – encounter and account for antisemitism.

Materials and methods

This study is part of an ongoing research project exploring the experiences of student health teams, schoolteachers and students, regarding their encounters with antisemitism and the educational measures taken to prevent it. This article specifically focuses on encounters with antisemitism from the perspective of professionals in student health teams.

A case study design (Yin, 2018) was adopted to analyse interviews with professionals in two schools in Sunrose City. The study investigated the reported presence of antisemitism as a contemporary phenomenon in Sunrose City's schools and how it is encountered and accounted for by student health teams in their daily work. Since the objective was to capture the everyday circumstances and conditions in a societal context, the two schools from which data were generated were regarded as one case with two similar settings (Yin, 2018). The city was strategically chosen for its recognised challenges with antisemitism, which led to the implementation of a long-term policy of preventative efforts in schools, organised by the local government in collaboration with the Jewish congregation. The selection of schools was informed by the city's board of education, their awareness of the presence of antisemitism and the recognised responsibility of school professionals to intervene and handle antisemitism. Based on these criteria, the selection of schools for the study was deterministic. However, the two schools were randomly selected from those available in this region.

Glimten School and Beachbrook School are upper secondary schools located in the inner city. Glimten School is characterised by vocational programmes and a multicultural student group. Beachbrook School, located in the heart of the inner city, also comprises a multicultural student population but primarily offers higher education preparatory programmes alongside two vocational programmes. Interviews with 12 professionals from the schools' student health teams were conducted in Autumn 2023 in both schools, lasting approximately 1 hour each. The interviews coincidentally took place around the Hamas-led attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, with some participants interviewed before and others shortly after, during the ensuing Israel-Hamas war. At Glimten School, the interviewees included a deputy principal, a school counsellor, a school nurse, a special education teacher and a resource person. At Beachbrook School, the interviewees included a principal, a deputy principal, two school counsellors, a school nurse, a special education teacher and a resource person. The participants – five men and seven women – were interviewed in the school premises during the day, except for the interview with the resource person at Beachbrook School, which was conducted via Zoom. As highlighted by Potter and Hepburn (2005), it is important to clarify that the interviewees were approached as members of the health team and, thus, spoke as representatives of their professional category.

An interview guide was employed, with open-ended questions covering broad themes (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) organised around background information, encounters with antisemitism and experiences with educational efforts to counter it. This allowed for variation in responses and follow-up questions, enabling a nuanced exploration of participants' experiences. It offered interviewees the flexibility to steer the conversation based on their own viewpoints, while the interviewer could adapt the order of questions and respond to emerging perspectives without losing focus on the study's aims (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participation was voluntary, and written consent was obtained from all participants. All persons and places were given

pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality (The Swedish Research Council, 2016). Formal ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Review number 2024-02685-02).

Discursive psychology approach

Because this study focuses on how health team professionals account for antisemitism and position themselves as professionals handling this issue, we applied an approach inspired by discursive psychology. Discursive psychology ‘starts with practices’ (Potter, 2012: 438), implying a focus on how individuals account for their actions, bracketing off issues of cognition related to the phenomena they talk about (Potter, 1996, 2012). Goodman (2017: 143) describes this approach as a way of regarding speakers’ utterances as more than reporting on a cognition; utterances are also performative; they achieve something by performing social acts in a specific social situation (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Utterances are also dependant on discourse, the practice that produces and governs possibilities for individual’s actions and speech (Foucault, 1972). Accordingly, it is crucial that analyses maintain a balance between examining speech acts and understanding the discursive basis for individual accounts.

Discursive psychology is employed to examine psychological phenomena in the context of their emergence in everyday social interactions. It emphasises the details of talk and text as objects of study themselves, and investigates the production and performance of psychological concepts in discursive practices (Wiggins, 2017). As a theoretical and analytical approach to discourse, it is intended for the analysis of ‘natural’ material or situations to elicit participants’ interpretive repertoires (Potter, 2012). Interpretive repertoires can be described as ‘common sense’ or ‘recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations’ (Goodman, 2017: 148). Interviews are constructed (or contrived) situations wherein the research setting and interviewers’ questions generate specific responses (Potter, 1996). Nevertheless, the approach is used with various types of ‘researcher-generated’ data, such as from individual interviews and focus groups, though not without critical debate (Wiggins, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to clarify that we regard the interview talk in this study on two levels. First, we examined it on a descriptive level, teasing out how participants spoke about their encounters and dealings with antisemitism. This talk was then categorised in terms of interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Second, we analysed the interviewees’ accounts on an interpretive level, examining how they positioned themselves in the struggle against antisemitism. Here, we attempted to tease out what was achieved through their utterances in relation to their professional position.

Results

Our analyses of how encountering antisemitism in schools is represented in interviews revealed that health team professionals generally position themselves as aware but not involved. In accordance with discursive psychology, the main interpretative repertoires found in the accounts are presented below. The excerpts exemplifying the repertoires have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

Antisemitism falls outside the scope of my professional role

Several participants provided examples of situations wherein they encountered antisemitic expressions but felt addressing these was beyond their professional tasks and responsibilities. Being a

professional in a school's student health team potentially put them on the frontline of countering antisemitism. In Sunrose City, an exhibition on the Holocaust was displayed for an extended period as part of broader efforts to combat antisemitism. Karin, a school nurse, describes her experiences of antisemitism when she accompanied students to this exhibition:

Interviewer: I'd like to know more about how you understand antisemitism, and how you relate to the phenomenon. To be direct, how does antisemitism occur at your school, and among students?

Karin: I recognised it when we went to the Holocaust exhibition. It was compulsory for all students to attend. I personally went there with very intense feelings. Meanwhile, hearing comments from some students, may be due to age differences, I heard them saying: 'That's not true. This hasn't happened'. And they were laughing, which felt completely out of place, especially when it was undeniable to me that the Holocaust took place. It's, after all, one of the most atrocious events of our time. I didn't even know how to respond (...) The Palestine-Israel conflict is also reflected at the school. After all, we have several Palestinians and sympathisers to their cause. But in my office, there's no dialogue about it. There's no reason for me to raise it if the students aren't acting on it. But when the topic comes up. If I asked them in here 'How do you feel about the Palestine-Israel conflict?', or 'what do you think about Jews?' I'm sure things would come up. My job isn't focused on these things, but it probably occurs in other places here (Karin, school nurse at Glimten School).

Karin positions herself as morally responsible; however, because of her professional position, she considers herself a distant spectator. Although she is aware that antisemitism is present among students, she does not consider it within her jurisdiction. While she states her concern about their revisionist views, her position as a school nurse gives her other matters to attend to. In her speech act, she immediately connects her experience of encountering Holocaust denial with the intensity of the Israel-Palestine conflict at school (Katzin, 2021; Persson, 2022). Jonas, a special education teacher, reflects on antisemitism as something that exists, but not a concern that he encounters in his daily work:

Interviewer: How do you encounter antisemitism here at school?

Jonas: Antisemitism isn't a topic I have a connection to on a daily basis, but I've been reflecting on this... since you last visited, for example I've heard 'you fucking Jew'... Now when I reflect upon it, I know that I've heard it before and it's used as a slur, and it... it can be very, very, subtle, but 'Jew' is synonymous with something very, very negative. And in a way, it's normalising... (Jonas, special education teacher at Beachbrook School).

Jonas positions himself as aware and concerned regarding the presence of antisemitism, even if it is beyond his professional reach. Notably, the research context is reflected in his statement that it made him think about how the word 'Jew' has a 'very, very negative' connotation. Jonas's account also reflects contradicting repertoires (Goodman, 2017); he is used to hearing the term 'Jew' as a 'slur', yet perceives it as 'subtle'. This makes the problem of structural antisemitism apparent, though still not significant enough for him to intervene beyond his professional boundaries. His reflection – although not elaborated upon – leads him to conclude that antisemitic jargon is normalised.

This normalisation of antisemitism emerged in other interviews. When asked about encountering antisemitism and its manifestations, Erik, a counsellor, provided a broad and summarising statement on how health team professionals may be involved in dealing with antisemitism:

Erik: It has not been so super, super, super clear during my time here. I haven't been involved in any direct situations. We don't ask questions about it either, so it's not so strange. It's not something we do every day.

Interviewer: So that's not what you talk about as a counsellor?

Erik: No, often it's not what you... no, it's not...

Interviewer: And your colleagues do they talk about encountering antisemitic expressions?

Erik: Well...No, not very often...But something that's persisted throughout all the years I've been at school is that it has always been quite apparent that some students refuse to recognise Israel on the map. If I take that example, denying Israel on the map, it's relevant to teaching. And that's where it happens, in class where teachers teach religion, geography, history. After all, it's in those contexts. Then, I also think...well, I think that you...I can't speak for the teachers, but I have a thought about it... that if you've worked for a long time in Sunrose City, you don't have the energy to make such a big fuss about it. It's not like you go to the principal and raise it.

Interviewer: Do you mean that it's been accepted then, or?

Erik: Well, you don't necessarily accept it. You have the discussion. But I also think that when I hear a story like that, I might also: 'Okay, I've heard it before'. And then we move on (Erik, counsellor at Beachbrook School).

Erik contextualises antisemitism as scarce expressions articulated in the classroom, something that teachers encounter, and that he may hear about afterwards. In the next line, he connects antisemitism to students' unwillingness to recognise Israel on the map, and thus deduces that antisemitism is related to antizionist standpoints in political and historical reasoning (cf. [Wagrell, 2022](#); [Weiser, 2021](#)). According to Erik, within an educational setting, it is not handled as a controversial topic that might cause conflict. Instead, these expressions are generally tolerated by him and the teachers, a normalised state of being where expressions of antisemitism are dealt with in the moment. Without further addressing his concerns, Erik, similar to Karin, implies that he does not ask questions about issues concerning antisemitism.

The character of antisemitism as directly linked to antizionist political and historical reasoning also occurs when Caroline, a special education teacher, shares her experiences:

Interviewer: Do you encounter antisemitism at this school and among the students?

Caroline: In my role as a special education teacher, I don't see much antisemitism. You know, it's not a topic that comes forward in my conversations with students. On the other hand, if I attend a session in a classroom, I know that there may very well be some comments, either negative connotations about Jews or comments that Jews are behind this and that, but also that the students don't separate Israelis from Jews. You know, many students here have their roots in Lebanon and Palestine, and they think it's the fault of the Jews that there's a war, and they don't distinguish between the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Jews. They don't talk much about the Holocaust but believe that Jews are running the world from backstage. Or they talk about them being stingy, like 'that kind of Jew' (Caroline, special education teacher at Glimten School).

Much like her colleagues, Caroline positions herself as aware of the prevalence of antisemitism but ascertains that she does not frequently see it in her daily practice. She argues that it falls outside

the scope of her role as a special education teacher. Engaged in conversations with students individually, antisemitism is not discussed. However, she has had encounters with traditional antisemitic conspiracy theories in classrooms when hearing students claim that ‘Jews are running the world’ and that the conflict between Israel and Palestine is caused by ‘Jews’. She associates conflicts with the geographical origins of the students and interprets it as their failure to separate state and religion.

Overall, the school health team professionals were aware of antisemitism among students. However, antisemitism is framed as a minor issue and something they do not encounter in their daily work. They substantiate this by saying that they have several other, more important problems to attend to, and that the issues concerning antisemitic statements or manifestations should be counteracted during teaching.

Antisemitism is a Jewish problem

Thus, although antisemitism is recognised as a problem, it is not considered something that needs to be dealt with or prevented by the health team. This is partly because of the professionally oriented repertoire that places the topic within the educational expertise domain and outside the health team’s, and also because of the ownership of the problem. There seems to be a common account that equates the presence of Jewish individuals with antisemitism. When interviewing Lena, an experienced school nurse, she describes experiences of encountering problems in her school as follows:

Interviewer: Have you encountered antisemitic expressions or prejudices?

Lena: No, actually I haven’t. Although we have many students from the Middle East. But at the same time, there are hardly any [Jewish students] here at school.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Lena: And the ones we have had, I don’t know if there have been problems [with antisemitism]. Though we have a lot of other problems, you know [laughing].

Interviewer: Oh, so you have other issues.

Lena: Yes, [negative views on] homosexuality and sex before marriage, especially connected to girls and such. Mm, that’s how it is, and then we haven’t even touched upon honour-based oppression (Lena, school nurse at Beachbrook School).

Lena reveals that she ‘doesn’t know’ whether there have been any problems with antisemitism and positions herself as a problem solver focussing on visible manifestations. She frankly connects the issue of antisemitism to the presence of many students from the Middle East, indicating that antisemitism is activated by ethnic or cultural polarisation, and thus, imbued by history and politics (Wagrell, 2022). While Lena is not neglecting antisemitism as a present problem at school, she needs to attend to more common and pressing issues.

For several interviewees, antisemitism is mainly recognised as a problem when a Jewish individual is the target of antisemitic slandering; thus, it is not considered a structural problem that should be addressed in school. The Jewish community in Sunrose City is rather small, as is the number of Jewish students. Jewish students are seemingly assimilated and not always visible. Karin emphasises that the absence of Jewish students makes antisemitism invisible.

Interviewer: So, you haven’t experienced situations where antisemitism occurred?

Karin: I don't come across it much in an everyday context, here at school. But it's because I don't handle that kind of problem. I don't even know if we have any people from the Jewish community here. I mean, if we had like...If we had disagreements...then I'd probably have seen it more. But they are only exposed to each other, they are from the same [background] and then I don't think they express antisemitism amongst their own (Karin, school nurse at Glimten School).

Much like her colleagues, Karin is aware of there being a problem; however, it does not affect her everyday work. She describes the student group as being rather homogeneous; the majority have an immigrant background and Jewish students are unknown to her. Without a concrete example, she anticipates that there might be a problem if Jewish students attend the school. Fredrik, a principal, agrees with this perspective. He describes experiencing Jewish students attending school and how antisemitic opinions accompany them.

Interviewer: Different opinions, is that common here at your school?

Fredrik: Oh, yes, we have plenty of different opinions here [laughing].

Interviewer: Opinions regarding antisemitism?

Fredrik: I'm sure there is, however, they could be expressed in more subtle or sophisticated ways. If you understand what I mean...

Interviewer: No, please elaborate.

Fredrik: Given that the grades required to be enrolled are very high, these students know how to conduct themselves, so to speak, and can be a bit more subtle in their criticism. Or they know how to conceal things.

Interviewer: Would you say that they conceal antisemitic expressions? Or is it not antisemitism they express?

Fredrik: Well, it's difficult to say. But I am absolutely sure that there's antisemitism at the school. Absolutely. Now, I know that we have more Jewish students, who have a Jewish identity at school, than we had a few years ago because they are open about it. I am absolutely sure that antisemitic expressions pop up from time to time, without perhaps them being aware that it's antisemitism that they're expressing (Fredrik, principal at Beachbrook School).

Fredrik is assertive when he speaks about the presence of antisemitism in his school. He also reflects on how well-mannered students have subtle or sophisticated ways of expressing antisemitism as criticism. However, he does not say that he knows of it or that he has encountered it; instead, he makes a deduction: the students' Jewish identities make him conclude that there must be antisemitism. Anne, a deputy principal, has a slightly different take. She recognises the issue of antisemitism when Jewish students are present at school and also relates it to more acute problems.

Interviewer: How does antisemitism occur? How is it expressed?

Anne: Well, today we don't have that many young people with a Jewish background, and when we did, there was direct slandering towards them. Today, it's more about someone making a Jewish joke or something connected to the Holocaust that they joke about in an inappropriate way. It can also be in the teaching environment, when you touch on topics that deal with Judaism and things that can be linked to antisemitism. I'll just say, sexism is probably a bigger concern for us.

Interviewer: How is it a bigger problem?

Anne: As a guy, you can allow yourself to comment on girls based on their bodies. Insults, not directly to them, but calling each other, ‘Fucking whore’ as a curse word; not saying it directly to a girl, but like that. So, it has increased, the sexism.

Interviewer: So, sexism is a bigger problem than the problems with antisemitism?

Anne: Well, we don’t have that many conflicts between Jews and Muslims because we have almost no Jewish students, so it’s not common to use antisemitic slurs (Anne, deputy principal at Beachbrook School).

Anne’s account connects antisemitism to the presence of Jewish individuals and how it might be caused by them attending the school, especially since there are Muslim students. In fact, the idea that Muslims are responsible for antisemitism based on the political situation in the Middle East is repeated through the interviews. The antisemitism imbued in Jewish jokes or inappropriate remarks about the Holocaust is seemingly innocuous, and she asserts that sexism is a more pressing problem. In this account, there is a contradiction in the described seriousness of the sexism performed among boys that the girls are not directly exposed to and the downplayed antisemitic jargon that is performed between students that Jewish individuals are not directly exposed to.

In conclusion, the interviewed student health team professionals emphasised the antisemitism encountered when there was a reciprocal relationship between the presence of Jewish students and antisemitic expressions. When there were no observable antisemitism victims, it was unclear to them whether antisemitism was present. Without Jewish students, it became challenging to identify occurrences of antisemitic expression since there were no individuals to manifest antisemitic ideas against.

Handling intolerance is my professional responsibility

During the interviews, we learned that Beachbrook School, to challenge antisemitic stereotypes among the students, employed Simon, a special resource person who identifies as Jewish. Simon was given the role of cultural guide for students to learn and understand Swedish Jews’ lives and culture. Pernilla, a school counsellor, spoke about the problems she encounters in her daily practice and was asked if there are issues of antisemitism. She addresses Simon’s presence and, like her colleagues, talks about antisemitism as a problem related to the presence of Jewish students.

Interviewer: How about problems with antisemitism?

Pernilla: I really don’t know, But I do read the papers and know it’s a problem in Sunrose City and seems to have increased. The information I get is from the media. I don’t experience it in my everyday work, nor do I hear about it at my workplace. I think that it’s due to Simon who walks around school in his kippah. I don’t know if it... sometimes I think that it has resulted in a culture of silence. I am on thin ice here, because I don’t hear enough about the problem to really speak truthfully about it; I need to answer based on the Jewish students I’ve been in contact with.

Interviewer: Are there students with a Jewish background?

Pernilla: Yes, there are. We had one student last year who wore a kippah; we had a lot of contact. He never said anything, and I guess that if he had problems with antisemitism, I would have been involved based on my professional role. I’m involved in all cases of harassment. Then I often think...I read the newspapers; I go to work. The first one doesn’t match the other. And then I immediately become a bit suspicious and wonder: ‘What am I missing?’ However, it doesn’t necessarily have to be like that. But anyway, what do I know? The students at this school who

identify as religious are Muslims and, of course, there can be clashes. I don't consider it antisemitism; I think of it as intolerance, whether we call it sexism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim, or whatever. You could think differently. Though, with me being responsible for more than 500 students, I cannot allow myself to focus on a single form of intolerance (Pernilla, counsellor at Beachbrook School).

Pernilla, rather than a distantly aware observer, positions herself as an informed observer. In her professional role, she is assertive of her position – should there be any expression of antisemitism, she would be informed. In her account, she speaks about how she is aware of issues with antisemitism in the city at large. However, she is unaware of antisemitism at the school. Additionally, Pernilla refers to her professional responsibility, noting that she ought to be involved in cases of harassment linked to antisemitic expressions. Thus, for antisemitism to occur, there must be a victim.

Nonetheless, Pernilla reflects on how Simon's presence as a cultural guide could have fostered a 'culture of silence'. Additionally, considering the predominance of Muslim students, there is a probability of 'hidden antisemitism'. According to Pernilla, antisemitism may also go unnoticed since Jewish students do not mention experiencing it. She also treats antisemitism as a form of intolerance, and thus not a specific issue to address. Accordingly, antisemitism is integrated within the discourse of general intolerance. This is a reoccurring theme; antisemitism is described as intolerant incidents that pop up occasionally, and not as a structural phenomenon that affects the lives of the Jewish community (c.f. [Katzin, 2021](#); [Pistone et al., 2021](#); [Wagrell, 2022](#)). Deputy principal Johanna reflected on her encounters with antisemitism and framed it as an issue of intolerance against what is described as foundational values. She opines that they can be handled within the routine work against intolerance.

Interviewer: Can you give a concrete example of when you encountered antisemitism?

Johanna: Even when I think back at my years of teaching and schools in other places, of course it has...well, I've encountered everything from neo-Nazis to outright racists to...well. But I can't really recall that anyone has...that it would have been perceived as an antisemitic problem...that is, that it would be a problem, but there have been isolated incidents. Now, the teachers, who meet all the students, say that this is a hot topic, that it has...

Interviewer: Now? Right now?

Johanna: Now, exactly. According to the teachers; maybe it's a problem at school, given that we have many Muslims. But it's nothing that I think very much about. I think we have a lot of problems with a lot of basic value issues, to be honest. But it isn't always visible, sometimes something happens, and so it's performed every now and then. This is what we try to have discussions about, what values really are. And antisemitism may not be the focus, instead it is foundational values. Because many of the students are really homophobic [laughs] (Johanna, deputy principal, Glimten School).

The interview with Johanna took place after the Hamas attacks, and when she refers to teachers meeting with students who consider it a hot topic, she is referring to the aftermath of the attack. In addition, she brings Muslim students into the equation and concludes that their presence entails a likely incidence of antisemitism in relation to the situation in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the interviewed professionals, whether they position themselves as distant and aware or close and informed observers of antisemitism, considered it an individual and temporary manifestation of intolerance. By framing it as an effect of intolerance, the problem becomes

approachable through ordinary activities that are within the scope of some of the professionals in the student health teams.

Discussion and conclusion

This study's aim was twofold: focussing on the professionals in student health teams, it examined how they account for encounters with antisemitism, and how they position themselves as professionals handling antisemitism.

Our study shows that although student health team professionals are assigned the task of assessing and handling school-related problems and are aware of antisemitic discourses and actual incidents, they do not engage in any preventative efforts. They are neither involved in handling the problem as a team nor in their respective professional positions. These findings are in line with [Larsliden and Nilholm \(2024\)](#), and the notion that without clear structure and leadership to guide the work, student health teams are problem-oriented rather than proactive. The analysis inspired by discursive psychology shows that in interpretative repertoires, it becomes clear that antisemitism presupposes the presence of Jewish students; even if there are descriptions of antisemitic stereotyping and slandering in educational settings, it is not necessarily considered antisemitic discourse, and even talked about as a normalised phenomenon. Nonetheless, to identify antisemitic expressions, Jewish students are considered necessary as subjects that activate otherwise invisible antisemitism (cf. [Gaines, 2000](#); [Wagrell, 2022](#)). Thus, practical implications arise that limit the ability to foster democratic and trusting relationships between students and society. This limitation stems from the perception that it is feasible, relevant and justified for health team professionals to address antisemitism – an integral aspect of proactive democratic work – only if representatives of the subordinate group are present. Furthermore, without necessarily having encountered it in school, the presence of Muslim students is portrayed as a catalyst for conflict and antisemitic incidents, as the interviewees assumed an inevitable conflict between Jewish and Muslim students because of historical and political events. There seems to be an inherent formula: Muslim students plus Jewish students equal antisemitism. The recurring conclusion made by the participants – that antisemitism must exist because there are Muslim students at the school – should be elevated in relation to intolerant discourses. The proposed conflict and subsequent war between Israel and Hamas can of course serve as background for these conclusions. However, it needs to be noted that antisemitism is being generalised to Muslims as a group. Given the rampant Islamophobia and stigmatisation of Muslims in Europe ([Abdelkader, 2017](#)), such discourse needs to be addressed and questioned such that work against antisemitism does not in turn engender other intolerant discourses.

In conclusion, for the whole-school approach, and national and local action plans combating antisemitism to be effective, student health teams, as a preventative unit, need to understand antisemitism as a structural and social phenomenon that manifests in jargon, stereotyping and jokes. This will enable recognition of its various aspects. Without this knowledge, health teams lack the ability to detect these expressions in their own practice and run the risk of reducing it to intolerance expressed by individual students ([Gaines, 2000](#)). Therefore, if school leaders and local boards of education expect schools to address the issue, they must offer training on how to handle specific instances as manifestations of a structural problem. In Sweden, Jews are recognised as a national minority, and the country has committed to take appropriate measures to promote full and effective equality between national minorities and the rest of the population in all areas of economic, social, political and cultural life ([Swedish Government, 2024](#)). To fulfil these policy commitments, and the commitments made by the government and local stakeholders to protect Jewish life and combat antisemitism, these policies must be implemented in practice.

Furthermore, rather than being viewed as an isolated expression of intolerance among individual students, antisemitism must be acknowledged for its unique features and historical roots, while also understanding how, in certain contexts, antisemitism is a form of racism (c.f., Stögner, 2020; Wagrell, 2022). Additionally, it should be emphasised and understood as a relevant societal issue, particularly in schools and by school professionals. Although our findings provide valuable insights, this study has some limitations and possible constraints regarding the use of qualitative interviews instead of naturally occurring data (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). Despite this, examining student health team professionals' accounts within the framework of research interviews holds intrinsic significance, as it shows that a valuable resource is lost by these professionals who inhabit key positions understanding antisemitism as a phenomenon positioned long ago and far away.

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Ethical statement

Ethical considerations

Formal ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Review number 2024-02685-02).

Consent to participate

All participants provided written informed consent to be interviewed for this study.

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Data availability statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical standards.

Note

1. It should be noted that this was the designation used at the time of Persson's study and the present study; the Israel-Palestine war, the Israel-Hamas war or the Israel-Gaza war can be used here.

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