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“It is like we don’t exist” – schooling experiences of Jewish children and adolescents in Malmö, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study analyses questions of exclusion in Swedish education from a Jewish minority perspective. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with 14 Jewish pupils aged 10–20 in Malmö about their experiences of attending non-Jewish schools. The interviews were interpreted through critical race theory and HebCrit. The findings show: (1) a structural privileging of Christian-Protestant norms in school routines and celebrations; (2) limited and stereotypical curricular representations of Judaism that exoticise Jewish pupils and position them as “Others”; (3) the normalisation of antisemitic jokes and slurs in school environments; and (4) the development of defensive or adaptive strategies that sometimes weaken connections to Jewish identity. These results contribute to understanding antisemitism as a form of structural racism within Nordic education and highlight the need to reconsider how multiculturalism and minority inclusion are enacted in Swedish schools.

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Introduction

In an international context, people are commonly reminded of antisemitism when hearing about Malmö, Sweden’s third largest city. This is not strange because incidents of antisemitism in Malmö have been covered to a large extent in international media (Wigerfelt & Wigerfelt, 2016). However, little actual research about Jews in Malmö has been carried out. This study builds on interviews with Jewish children and adolescents in Malmö regarding their experiences of attending non-Jewish schools in the city. This work is a case study of experiences in Malmö, which tell rich stories about the city’s problems and about Swedish schools and European education in general.

Existing research on minority pupils’ experiences in European and Nordic schools shows consistent patterns of marginalisation, stereotyping and subtle exclusion. Studies of Muslim pupils in Sweden and Finland, for example, document how majority norms shape school practices in ways that render minority traditions invisible while marking non-Christian pupils as culturally “Other” (Poulter et al., 2016; Rissanen, 2020). Research from other contexts demonstrates similar dynamics for Jewish pupils. Moulin’s (2016) interviews with Jewish adolescents in non-Jewish schools in England reveal how pupils encounter exoticising representations of Judaism and recurrent antisemitic jokes in peer cultures. Gross and Rutland’s (2014) study of “schoolyard antisemitism” in Australia and Thomas’s (2016) work on Norwegian classrooms likewise show the prevalence of antisemitic stereotypes, Holocaust-related humour and teachers’ difficulties

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responding to them. These findings suggest that Jewish pupils' experiences can illuminate broader processes of exclusion within liberal, formally egalitarian school systems.

Against this backdrop, little is known about how Jewish children in Sweden navigate such environments. Despite public attention to antisemitism in Malmö, empirical research on Jewish pupils' everyday school experiences is scarce. The present study addresses this gap and situates the Malmö case within a wider body of research on minority pupils in Nordic and European schools. By bringing in the perspective of young Swedish Jews, established in Sweden but with a religious or ethnic background that differs from most of their peers, new light could be shed on the question of multiculturalism in Swedish schools and in liberal European education overall.

Swedish schools are marked by two ideological characteristics. One central characteristic of the Swedish curriculum is the idea of universality. The Nordic education model stipulates the ideal of "one school for all" (Zilliacus et al., 2017). A second characteristic is, however, the educational ideology built on a combination of secularism and Protestantism, which Poulter et al. (2016, p. 71) have named "secular Lutheranism". In school, this paradox takes form through strong ideals of ideological neutrality in education, combined with central educational aims focusing on fundamental national values, which are concurrently liberal, secular, and Christian. Both discourses are simultaneously supported by state authority. The current Swedish curriculum states that education should be "non-denominational", which implies that no particular worldview should be prioritised in education. However, the curriculum, after a symbolic change made by politicians, also refers to "ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism". Heß (2019) emphasises that the Nordic states are characterised by an unusually large religious homogeneity, where distancing from the religious "Other" has been a starting point in defining the nation and creating its own identity. Denčik (2019) points out that the homogenisation of Swedish society today goes under a different flag: secularisation, enlightenment, and a political culture where religion is seen as something private even though it still permeates national values. In this way, the historical dominance of a Christian, Protestant majority perspective remains, even today.

Berglund (2014) describes a Czech colleague who expressed great surprise when studying Swedish schools, which she supposed to be secular. She noted that the school year follows the Christian Lutheran calendar; the Lutheran holidays are celebrated in schools, and the teachers she had met hardly had any knowledge about non-Lutheran or non-Christian holidays. Many of the textbooks presented non-Lutheran religions in an exotic or negative way, and Protestantism was typically described in liberal democratic terms, whereas other religions were cast as more authoritarian. Berglund (2014) states that this outside view puts light on the phenomenon that what from an inside-Sweden perspective is presented as neutral and objective may be understood from an outside perspective as deeply Lutheran: not only in terms of the country's history, but also in terms of how people think and talk about religion in society, how religion is taught, holidays celebrated in schools, and so on. Sweden is a society that Berglund (2014, p. 181) describes as "marinated in Lutheran Christianity, officially claiming to have washed away the marinade, but having problems in admitting that the taste abides".

Borrowing insights from critical race theory (CRT), postcolonial theory, and what Rubin (2020) calls "HebCrit" – a way of applying critical race theories to experiences of antisemitism – this study analyzes education as a field where ideas of the nation and its minorities are constructed, and the limited and negative conceptions of Jews that could be expressed there as outcomes of structural and institutionalized aspects of power. The research questions are threefold:

- (1). How do Jewish adolescents experience being a minority in their school?
- (2). What images, stories, and negative stereotypes of Jews do Jewish adolescents encounter in school?
- (3). What kind of narratives do Jewish pupils develop from their negative experiences, and what corresponding strategies do they deploy?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, for a better understanding of antisemitism and Jewish identity in the Swedish educational setting, I present related background knowledge. Then, I discuss the phenomena of inclusion or exclusion, multiculturalism, and “Othering” within a school context in general and specifically in Swedish schools. The theoretical framework, building on CRT and theories of antisemitism, is presented thereafter. Next, after discussing the study’s data and methods, I report the results by analysing them through a theoretical lens. In the discussion section, I provide the results considering these theories and point out a way forward towards further studies.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Antisemitism and Jewish identity in Swedish educational settings – what do we know?

There is limited research on the Jewish minority in Sweden. Although a literature stream focuses on Jewish life in Sweden (see e.g., Carlsson, 2021; Glück et al., 1997; Tojzner et al., 2022), only a few academic studies exist. Noteworthy are the studies conducted by Dencik and Marosi at the beginning of the 2000s (referred to in Dencik, 2003); however, these data are over 20 years old and focus on adult members of Jewish congregations. Within Swedish research, studies of antisemitism are also limited. Geverts (2019) points out that almost all research on antisemitism in Sweden has been carried out in the fields of history or history of ideas, and that few new studies have been added since 2007. The topic of antisemitism in school has also been neglected in Scandinavian research – with some exceptions that mostly consist of official reports (e.g., Pollack Sarnecki et al., 2019; Severin, 2014). Two other noteworthy exceptions are a study by Krantz (2018) on third generation Jewish Holocaust survivors, which also mirrors their experiences in school, and the research by Thomas (2016) on antisemitism in Norwegian schools. Little in-depth research focusing on Jews and antisemitism within the school system has been undertaken, also in international literature. A meta study underlines the limited focus on antisemitism within educational research globally (Pistone et al., 2021). The research performed in the United Kingdom by Moulin (2016) is one of few studies on Jews in school. It builds on interviews with adolescents who self-identify as Jewish and attend a non-Jewish secondary school in a British community. The study found that participants’ reported experiences of peer-worlds were often related to being a minority. In Moulin’s study, most of the participants reported negative schooling experiences, where antisemitic prejudice, abuse, and stereotypes were integral.

The international literature that exists illustrates how antisemitism in schools operates within broader structures of minority marginalisation. Moulin’s (2016) work in England, Gross and Rutland’s (2014) findings from Australia, and Thomas’s (2016) case study in Norway all reveal similar combinations of stereotypical curricular representations, peer-level antisemitic slurs, and teachers’ difficulties addressing them. These converging patterns indicate that the mechanisms observed among Jewish pupils in Malmö are not merely local anomalies.

Although empirical research on Jews in schools is limited, international studies of minority education show structural patterns that are directly relevant to the Swedish context. Studies of Muslim pupils in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark (Jaffe-Walter, 2019; Poulter et al., 2016; Rissanen, 2020) demonstrate how liberal inclusion discourses coexist with practices that reinforce national majoritarian norms. These findings suggest that processes of “Othering” in Nordic schools are not specific to any single minority. The Swedish case can therefore be understood as part of a wider pattern in which formally egalitarian school systems reproduce cultural hierarchies.

Inclusion, exclusion, and “Othering” in Swedish schools

The school is a public domain where subjectivities and identities are constructed and the spheres of the private and public are negotiated. Principles of inclusion, equality, and democratic values are

often put upfront in the Nordic liberal schooling, and ideas of universalism, individualism, and progress are strong. The public school system is also closely connected to the national project, responsible for creating citizens and upholding normative conceptions, through which cultural and religious practices and imaginaries within the nation state are reinforced. In Jaffe-Walter's (2019, p. 287) words, there is an "everyday narration of the nation" that takes place in schools through talk, texts, curriculum, and pedagogy. The "Others", with cultures and languages that differ from those of the core nation, challenge the aspirations of majority nation-building. The presence of minorities "disrupts the cultural and political order of the nation, and thus challenges its sense of unity and authenticity" (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 603).

This study starts with the problem of antisemitism being grounded in a process of "Othering," in which the minority gets a role projected onto it by the majority. It investigates the majority society and its processes of racialisation, whereby meaning is attributed to characteristics of the racialised minority (Kushner, 2008). These processes create vulnerability and discrimination at the group level and construct categories and stereotypes in ways that can lead to harassment and fear of "the Other" at the individual level.

In a study of Muslim experiences in Swedish and Finnish schools conducted by Rissanen (2020), the teachers manifested a lack of understanding of the multifaceted intersections of religion and culture; for instance, granting only the Protestant Christian tradition status as a cultural heritage and "religifying" Islam. Poulter et al. (2016) show how religion in Nordic education is narrowly seen as membership of a certain group, or a collection of myths and rituals, and these ways of looking at the world are seen as subjective, private, and committed to tradition. Difference is thus considered a characteristic of the "Other" and religions are not seen as inherently plural, dynamic, and evolving traditions. Kittelmann Flensner (2015) shows in her study of religious education in contemporary Sweden that the educational goals of respect and understanding for other religions, beliefs, and worldviews are difficult to reach in a classroom environment that is so marked by secularism. The teachers in her study perceive of an atheist position as neutral and objective, while subjectifying and exotifying religious people, especially those belonging to religions other than Christianity. Processes of "Othering" are thus happening at the level of epistemology, institutional orders, and everyday practices in schools, resulting in systematic but subtle discrimination of minorities (Poulter et al., 2016). The consequences for minorities within such a fiction of universalism is a loss of their own ethnic, cultural, and linguistic practices, at least if they want to enter on equal terms into the public realm (May, 2008).

Jaffe-Walter (2019) argues that principles of inclusion, equality, and democratic values are often put upfront in Western liberal schooling to recognize the plurality within which they are positioned. However, critical race scholars have argued that these epistemologies have historically been deployed to enact and justify racial inequalities. Goldberg (2015) claims that the current age is defined by ideas of "post-racialism" and that societies have moved beyond racism, while inequality remains hidden behind new discourses of "colour-blindness." These supposedly neutral, formally egalitarian, and de-ethnicized presuppositions are constructed in a way that mystifies the public sphere of the nation-state as reflective of the particular cultural practices of the dominant ethnic group. What in education is presented as "neutral", thus may represent the particular communal practices, interests, and values of the dominant ethnic group as if these values were held by all (May, 2008).

Taken together, this research suggests that Sweden is situated within a broader international field of liberal educational systems that formally promote equality while simultaneously reproducing normative majoritarian cultural frameworks. The Swedish-Jewish case becomes analytically valuable because it illustrates how a national minority with deep historical roots encounters dynamics that are typically studied in relation to immigrant or racialised groups. This comparative framing makes it possible to understand Jewish pupils' experiences not only as evidence of antisemitism, but also as a lens onto wider structures of minoritisation in Nordic education.

Understanding antisemitism as a form of structural racism – A conceptual lens

As Kushner (2008) points out, academic analyses of antisemitism are relatively recent, and often deal with antisemitism as a concept or structure not fully related to racism in general. He argues that the experiences of Jews and the pressure they have felt to conform and assimilate highlights aspects of the minority – majority societal relationship, which are often missed in traditional racism theory. Goldberg (2009) argues that the abstract concept and social category “race” lies at the bottom of racism, but that race is a pliable and elastic concept that has shifted in meaning over time and place. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw generalisations such as those for the historical system that Goldberg calls racial *Europeanisation*. Goldberg’s allusion to racial Europeanisation as “Christian” pinpoints the place of religion in this project. Meer (2013) argues that CRT, however, too often separates race and religion. When looking at the historical roots of their interconnectedness, racism can be seen to have a longer pedigree than is currently registered, to explain earlier movements of power throughout Europe. Meer argues that to capture many of the mechanics of racialisation accurately, it is useful to observe how racialised categories have saturated cultural portrayals of Muslims and Jews; “what it facilitates is a focus not on religious bigotry or prejudice per se, but on people, groups, and minorities who are the sites of racial inscriptions” (Meer, 2013, p. 390). It is therefore theoretically promising to place the history of the Jews and the responses to them in the broader perspective of the minority experience as a whole, and to let studies of antisemitism and the experiences of Jews inform studies of racism. It is increasingly common to use CRT insights to understand antisemitism better (e.g., Branfman, 2019; Rubin, 2020). This article is written in this young tradition, which Rubin called “HebCrit,” further exploring ways of understanding antisemitism as a form of structural racism. Rubin also argues that much can be gained in understanding the experiences of Jews through a CRT framework, including an analysis of subtle impressions of racism on Jews’ self-image, identity-making, and interactions with others; aspects often missed in antisemitism analyses. Such analyses often focus on ideology and perpetrators. Rubin also underlines the need to listen to Jewish personal stories to capture and understand racism against Jews. Such a combination of approaches allows for greater theoretical complexity in understanding antisemitism.

Materials and methods

Data collection

The interviews comprising this study’s primary data were conducted as part of a task of systematising knowledge on antisemitism in Malmö’s schools, commissioned by the municipality. I found the informants through collaborations with the Jewish congregation of Malmö and through a youth club for Jews in Malmö. No incentives were given. In this study, I included only members of the Jewish congregation thinking that those who are themselves members and raised in families that are community members find it important and central to identify as Jewish (Dencik, 2003). This makes them more prone to observing aspects of a school that collide with their Jewish identity. The sampling strategy was thus purposive: young people with lived experience of being Jewish in non-Jewish educational settings were specifically sought, in line with the study’s aim.

Interviews and informants

The 14 Jewish children and adolescents (10 girls, 4 boys) I interviewed were between 10 and 20 years old and go or have recently gone to school in Malmö. The age span reflects the intention to capture schooling experiences across late childhood, early adolescence, and the transition to upper-secondary school. The interviews were conducted from September to December 2020. All interviews lasted for one to two hours. A few took place individually, others in pairs or smaller groups. All interviewees were first informed of the study’s purpose and their anonymous participation; their consent

(or their custodian's, for participants younger than 15 years) was received. The interviews followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017) and the conditions required by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in approved research protocols. To meet the requirement of consent, the interviews started by verifying that the informants had understood the instructions on informants' rights and the research context. To ensure confidentiality, the informants have been anonymised here, and their names have been changed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on predetermined themes: (1) the informants' perceptions of Jews in school and in religious education, (2) experiences of being open or hiding one's Jewish identity in school, and (3) explicit experiences of antisemitism and the school's corresponding reaction. The themes were brought up through open questions and in ongoing conversations where the interviewees were given the opportunity to develop their thoughts in the directions they naturally go. The interviews were recorded before being transcribed verbatim. All translations of the Swedish text to English in the following have been made by the author.

Analysis

As an exploratory study, analyses of the interview data are illustrated by examples of participants' reported experiences. Interviews allow capturing more complex circumstances and developing reflections. The interviews provide insights into relationships, experiences, and feelings, as well as routines, structures, and everyday life; for example, in the school as an institution (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The approach to the informants was inspired by Engel (1999, p. 5), who describes his informants as "sociologists in everyday life" and "observers of their own worlds". As these descriptions suggest, interviewees should not be seen as passive study objects but rather as active participants in the study, who, through the conversation, are involved in shaping my and their own knowledge and understanding.

This article's themes were selected through a cycle of coding of quotations in NVivo 12, combined with an emerging conceptual framework based on theories developed by other researchers. Transcripts were first read holistically to gain an overview of recurrent experiences. In a second step, meaning-bearing units were coded. Coding was initially open and descriptive; as the analysis progressed, codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories that were informed both by participants' own formulations and by relevant theoretical concepts (CRT and HebCrit). The analysis moved back and forth between empirical material and theory, allowing themes to be refined throughout the process. The presence of recurring themes in the interviews indicates credibility for the quotes given, which are intended to provide insights into the participants' stories. Recurring themes were identified across participants of different ages and genders, which supports the credibility of the findings. In the interviews, the informants talk about their experiences in school, and discuss and negotiate their Jewish identities, in a process of meaning-making and with the result that the representations of the reported experiences were coloured by such (Moulin, 2016). The study draws on a critical reading of the reinforcing processes between individual experiences and societal structures, which follows the idea, central to CRT, that racism is a cultural system that is played out in institutions such as schools (Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

Although the study is based on a single type of data – interviews – triangulation was achieved on two interconnected levels. First, analytic categories were developed through repeated cycles of reading and re-reading the material, during which alternative conceptual interpretations were systematically considered. Second, theoretical triangulation was integrated throughout the analysis. Insights from CRT, HebCrit and research on minority schooling in the Nordic countries, particularly studies concerning Muslim pupils, were used to illuminate different dimensions of the same empirical patterns. These complementary lenses strengthened the interpretive depth of the analysis and enhanced the validity of the conclusions drawn.

Findings

Jews are excluded as a minority

In Malmö, Jews are a marginalised minority, purely numerically, and most of the Jewish children and young people I interviewed are or have been alone as Jews at their school or at least in their class. This is how a high school pupil describes how she experiences this situation.

I remember the first time we talked about religions in school, then the teacher asked if there were any Christians and then most raised their hand, then if there were any Muslims and then there were some who raised their hand. Then he said, 'I do not think we have any Jews, but I can ask anyway' and then it was only my little hand that went up. And the teacher was very surprised and treated me like a rarity. It felt like ... It's like you become exotic because no one really knows anything. So, you get singled out, you become something exotic. It makes you feel more different than the rest of the class. Sara, 14 years old

Even though the schools that my informants go or have gone to are non-denominational, in many schools only the Protestant holidays are celebrated, while some schools try to pay attention to other religious holidays that might be relevant to their pupils. The informants say that they usually go to church at school graduations. In a conversation with a small group of elementary school pupils, they told me that they think it is unfair to anyone who is not a Christian that the Christian holidays, traditions, and places of worship get attention while their own traditions and religious places remain unknown. This is how they describe the experience that this known injustice creates in them is linked to their identity as Jews.

Maya: It's like we don't even exist.

Ester: We're kind of like the ugly duckling.

Hanna: We're kind of like Cinderella.

Lea: Sometimes I get a little upset that we only celebrate the Christian holidays and have kind of Christmas decorations and stuff, that we could not have anything else like from Judaism or Islam.

Maya, 10 years old; Ester and Hanna, 11 years old; Lea, 12 years old.

Here, the pupils succeed, with the help of metaphors, to bring out what is central in the experience of exclusion. The young pupils describe that when they were younger, they even found it hard to understand that they were Jewish, since everything around them in school was based on Christian traditions. The pupils also experience that they may end up in a vulnerable position in the school canteen when they tell others that they do not eat pork. They were also not certain of being able to get time off from school to celebrate Jewish holidays (the Swedish calendar and school year are built around Protestant holidays).

Being perceived as different can be quite difficult for someone who is a child or youth. The schools' great emphasis on certain ways of being, living, and celebrating underlines an exclusionary norm and a hierarchy that shapes experiences and identities for those who are minorities. These experiences exemplify what CRT identifies as *majoritarian normativity* – the process through which the cultural practices of the dominant group are positioned as neutral and universal. The children's sense of "not existing" can be understood as a form of epistemic exclusion, in which minority ways of being are structurally invisible in the institutional imagination of the school. The results can be understood in relation to Kittelmann Flensner's (2015) finding that the image of being Swedish produced in schools is connected to ideas of individuality, tolerance, and rationality. Meanwhile, Christian traditions were presented as less "religious" than traditions connected to other world religions. There was an apparent lack of understanding of lived religion in education. Several of these tendencies were also apparent in the study done by Moulin (2016), which reveals that Jews attending non-faith schools did not find these "faith-neutral" but rather, influenced in many ways by Christian cultural assumptions such as the organisation of a school year around Christian holidays.

Stereotype images and stories of Jews in Swedish schools

From the stories of the Jewish pupils, it appears that in school there is limited access to pictures of or stories about different ways of living and being Jewish. Above all, two stories exist: one related to the Holocaust, and one related to Orthodox Judaism encountered in religion education. The image of Jews as victims of the Holocaust, presented at history lessons, is not appreciated by the Jewish pupils. In this picture, the situation and vulnerability of Swedish Jews today disappear. With respect to religious education, what is portrayed is, in many cases, only an orthodox variant of Judaism that few Swedish Jews live by. Generally, the pupils do not recognise themselves in the image of the orthodox Jew, as their own experience of being Jewish is not very religious. Instead, they feel alienated by the images of Jews, who are also often portrayed as old-fashioned and with conservative gender roles. Ruth, 18 years old; Ella, 20 years old; and Julia, 19 years old, tell me that in connection with teaching about Judaism, they have been questioned based on the traditional gender roles that are portrayed as linked to Orthodox Judaism but do not resemble the Judaism that they live by. The informants also tell me that they have not encountered different orientations of Judaism in their religion education. Ruth laughs when I ask if she thinks she can identify with the images of Jews that she encountered in school. “If you look in the books, they only talk about Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem and I just [say] “Okay, LOL!” No, I actually do not recognise myself!” Daniel also found the question amusing.

The only image you get of Jews are with side curls and hats. And that’s why people got very confused when they understood that I was a Jew – I’m blond and do not go for that thing at all! Daniel, 19 years old

From a HebCrit standpoint, the emphasis on Orthodox Jews as the only recognisable template reproduces a racialised imaginary of Jewishness as inherently conservative, exotic, and distant from Swedish modernity. This essentialisation positions secular and culturally Jewish pupils outside the boundaries of recognisable identity categories, illustrating the HebCrit argument that exclusion of Jews often operates through epistemological Othering.

Another element raised by the informants is the general lack of knowledge about Jews and Judaism, even among religion teachers. All informants tell stories of teachers who are ignorant of central aspects of Judaism, such as rituals or concepts. As a result, the pupils need to step in to correct the teachers, provide a “key” for the classmates, or at times even take over the teaching – they stop being “pupils like the rest of the class” (John, 19 years old), and feel exotified and excluded. The informants also protest the lack of knowledge about what it means to live Jewish in Sweden today. The teachers’ ignorance results in the pupils having to take responsibility for filling the knowledge gap.

In class, it is well known that I am Jewish. When we have talked about Judaism in the class, everyone asks me about everything, including the teacher. I constantly added to what he said and developed it, and it ended up with him looking at me when he taught, as [if] to ask me if he was right. And all the classmates asked me and wanted me to help them. I didn’t really like it but I did it anyway so they would stop bothering me. It has always felt that way – when we learn about Judaism, I stop being a pupil who is there to learn, but instead become like a kind of answer. It felt so strange – they talked about it in terms of ‘them’, as something separate from us in the class, but I was one of ‘them’! Sara, 14 years old

The tendency to describe secular vs. religious people through a rhetoric of “us” and “them” is also described by Kittelmann Flensner (2015) in her study of religious education in Swedish schools. It was particularly salient when it came to religions other than Christianity, and while Christianity was described in a nuanced way, the other world religions were presented through their most conservative or orthodox interpretations and as uniform and static. Moulin (2016) found that a corollary of being a minority was peers’ reported curiosity in perceived exotic Judaic practices and beliefs. The boundaries of Jewish identity – the rites of passage, festivals, and food laws of Judaism – were reported to be of intense interest to participants’ non-Jewish peers, and in some cases, also irksome. Some participants found the attention they received as unwanted, as they felt singled out or stressed at answering their peers’ questions correctly.

The Jewish pupils also experience that these problems lead to them not being understood and recognised as Jews themselves, because they do not live up to the images of Jews that other pupils have encountered in school. Ella describes the situation in a telling way.

One problem in Malmö is getting to know Jews. People read about Jews, hear stories, but have never met anyone. This is a difference from larger cities. Sometimes I'm not Jewish enough for Swedes to think I fit into the template. Sometimes it's disturbing that I'm Jewish ... I'm exposed in one second and must defend my identity in the next. Ella, 20 years old

The experiences reported above illustrate how Jewish identities are misrepresented in the curricula of non-Jewish schools, which implies that classroom worlds act as negative systems of representation. As in this study, the informants in Moulin's (2016) study were often critical of the representation of Jewish identity in education. Fulfilling the school's aims to promote social cohesion and respect for members of religions in a multi-faith society may require developing a curriculum that represents (or refers to) Judaism and Jewish identities authentically without appearing to undermine or stereotype them.

Schoolyard antisemitism and the schools' inability to tackle it

A central problem that recurs in my interviews is the experience of hearing antisemitic slurs in the school's social environment. Gross and Rutland (2014) call the phenomenon "schoolyard antisemitism". In their study, schoolyard antisemitism followed classical antisemitic ways of thinking, in which Jewish children were teased with slurs that they should be stingy or heard that Hitler had not done a good enough job. These patterns are also reflected in the experiences of my informants. What seems most frequent is the use of "Jew" simply as an insult and the connection of being a Jew with stinginess or greed. The occurrence of jargons such as "you are stingy as a Jew" and the like are recounted, as well as jokes about the Holocaust, Hitler salutes, and swastikas in the school environment.

These slurs could be directed to the Jewish pupils, but they are not necessarily so. The pupils describe that these jokes can come from anyone, and they interpret them as arising from ignorance rather than malice, but they see it as problematic that such slurs are accepted. Ella tells of her experience.

Jokes are what you encounter. It's everything from 'stingy Jew' to 'I'll gas you'. I have had friends who also joked about it, and it actually feels terrible that they take such liberties – what you do then is to normalise a racist jargon. There is an active ignorance in those jokes. In my generation, you want to be able to joke about everything, but your joke is normalised racism and a result of not understanding what happened [during the Holocaust]. Ella, 20 years old

These results are in line with what the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has found in its report on antisemitic hate crimes, where it is described that teachers and other school staff tell of Hitler salutes, derogatory jokes about Jews, and the use of "Jew" as an insult or to describe someone as stingy or greedy in school environments in different parts of Sweden (Pollack Sarnecki et al., 2019). These forms of "joking" correspond closely to the CRT concept of *microaggressions*, which accumulate to produce forms of everyday racism that appear trivial to bystanders but carry deep structural meaning for those targeted. It often manifests through culturally permissible forms of humour and double meaning, where racist content is deflected as irony.

However, in some situations, the Jewish children encounter more hateful individual expressions. In principle, all interviewed pupils have been victims of verbal or physical attacks of varying kinds, but how common it is for them, and the level of seriousness, varies. Some of the Jewish adolescents have been directly exposed to threats and violence, others have been more exposed to "offensive and disturbing incidents," as Ruth, 18 years old, describes it. The older pupils describe the attacks as more common in junior high or high school, and that there is a shift from jokes and jargon to something more threatening and violent the older the pupils get. However, it can also start earlier.

Hanna, 11 years old, told me about an incident that had occurred when she was in fourth grade, in which seven guys from another school started throwing snowballs at her, shouting that they hate Jews. David, 17 years old, has been bullied since middle school. He describes that he was bullied because he was a Jew and that a classmate in the fifth grade said, “I will burn you at the stake, you f*cking Jewish bastard”. About his high school years, he says:

In high school, it was a guy who was very threatening. When we had woodwork class, he picked up a saw and wanted to scare me. He was someone who believed in various conspiracy theories and such. David, 17 years old

Adina, 17 years old, describes how the junior high school years developed into a horrible situation when a new pupil came to the class and created a troublesome atmosphere in which more people suddenly joined while others did not speak up against the harassment. The pupil made Hitler salutes in the classroom, and several other classmates joined in using slurs and “Jew jokes”. Daniel, 19 years old, talks about an incident he was involved in during junior high and how this resulted in exclusion thereafter. He had intervened when a guy, who he previously knew had used antisemitic threats, was bullying a smaller guy. This eventually led to an attack, which the Jewish pupil later learned was precipitated by the anger the aggressor felt when he was stood up by a Jew. However, the school just took it as a physical quarrel and did not attach importance to the antisemitism expressed in connection to the incident.

Several of the informants in my study express disappointment with the schools’ handling of antisemitism. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention’s report on antisemitic hate crimes also shows interviewees’ loss of confidence in society’s institutions for not reacting sufficiently to the perceived normalisation of antisemitic rhetoric. Experiences were reported in which teachers’ lack of capacity to deal with antisemitism led students to choose not to confront pupils who have expressed antisemitism (Pollack Sarnecki et al., 2019). The schools’ limited responses reflect a structural permissibility: institutions unintentionally protect dominant-group comfort by avoiding confrontation with racism, thereby normalising harmful practices.

What Jewish youths experience is what Kvist Geverts (2008) has described as an antisemitic “background noise”, consisting of latent thoughts and prejudices that may arise in different situations. The pupils in my interview study describe how this can occur in the classroom, in the school environment, at parties, or in social media. These are everyday situations that show how subtle negative notions about Jews exist in broad circles, without that reason, most people who carry these notions would express them through ideological or violent attacks on Jews. However, for the Jewish group, it becomes a constant reminder of the existence of negative prejudices and perceptions associated with their identity. The classroom world can represent a challenge to the informants’ Jewish identities, as it sometimes constitutes perceived harm or threat of harm. The ascription of negative Jewish identities in peer-worlds, some of which would be commonly accepted as obviously antisemitic, is concerning (Moulin, 2016).

Narratives and strategies amongst the pupils

A key result of my study concerns the perceived insecurity of the Jewish youth in Malmö. Because of the hate crimes they have been exposed to and the fear of future incidents, their everyday lives and identity development are affected. The informants relate to living and showing their Jewish identity in terms of security – not necessarily of fearing physical attacks but of feeling vulnerable and excluded, as linked to the existing widespread prejudices about Jews.

However, how pupils relate emotionally to these expressions varies. Some express that they are so used to jokes about Jews, especially about stinginess and money, and to conspiracy theories online, that it is almost normal for them. A couple of pupils describe that “I can handle it” (John, 19 years old) or “it just passes me by” (Samuel, 18 years old), while they are more worried about physical and threatening expressions. Rubin (2020) refers to research showing that Jews tend to minimise and dismiss being the subject of jokes and derogatory name-calling, as “the typical

stuff” and “the usual sort of things”. This minimalisation of feelings can be seen as part of the internalised oppression that leads the victims to downplay their experiences of offences.

For others, the presence of this jargon is a distinctively negative experience that the informants associate with exclusion and insecurity. One pupil describes that she always has a “security mindset” (Julia, 19 years old); another, that she has become less comfortable talking about her Judaism the higher up in the school system she has come, even though it is something she feels that “everyone knows, there is a lot of talk of it” (Adina, 17 years old). The younger pupils say that they are usually open about being Jewish, but sometimes, they feel embarrassed or exposed that they choose to lay low with it. They also often carry warnings from parents and others. From a CRT perspective, these narratives show how young people navigate a racialised school environment in which the burden of managing racism is placed on the minority. The pupils’ descriptions of weighing up when to speak, when to remain silent, and when to conceal their Jewishness point to a constant effort to avoid being read through stereotypes or exposed to further antisemitic comments. Their strategies thus illustrate how structural conditions in school shape what it means to live openly as Jewish in everyday life.

Lea, 12 years old, says that in a period of her life, she was so afraid that “someone would come and shoot me” that she did not tell anyone she was a Jew. She was simply “afraid that the Holocaust would happen again.” Stories from home and older relatives who fled the Holocaust or were victims of it thus play a direct role in the Jewish pupils’ experiences of the persecution to which they are, or are afraid of being, subjected to. Krantz (2018), who has researched third-generation Holocaust survivors, shows how their school days are marked by manifest and latent antisemitism, which leads the study participants to develop strategies for how open they should be about their Jewish identity. She states that it is a “ubiquitous parameter” (Krantz, 2018, p. 153) for the group, and also points out how their own experiences are woven together with the family stories of the Nazi persecution of Jews. Krantz (2018) believes that this parallelism between the past and the present antisemitism is a central component in these young people’s identity creation. This illustrates how contemporary antisemitic experiences in school are read through a historical lens, so that past and present persecutions merge into a single horizon of risk. This interweaving of family memory and current vulnerability becomes a central axis of identity work for the pupils, shaping how open they dare to be about being Jewish.

One, less obvious, consequence of the perceived antisemitism is that the minority culture is weakened, and those who belong to the minority culture find it more difficult to live by and identify with it. Daniel, 19 years old, describes that he has felt very alone in his experiences, since he did not perceive enough support from the school. Eventually, he stopped reacting to the slurs, because he did not want things to become more difficult for him. He has also kept quiet about his Jewishness as far as possible to avoid being defined by it or limited as a “Jew”.

I had a classmate in high school who originated in Poland, and he could use ‘f*cking Jew’ as an insult in the classroom, not to me but with his friends, and the teachers did nothing, and I thought it was the hardest. I did not feel that I wanted to say anything about it because it would only be a debacle and then my high school years would become very difficult. And this even happened in history lessons and if anyone should know what antisemitism can lead to, it should be a history teacher! But that teacher just did not want to take care of it. [It was] too hard. So I felt very alone in it and just let it be. Daniel, 19 years old

Hanna, 11 years old, says that she is the only one in her class who is Jewish, and that she sometimes “regret” that she is a Jew and “wonder why I have to be that”. Rebecka, 20 years old, expresses how she used to feel this way when she was younger.

If you grow up without so much connection to the Jewish [community] and hear all the swear words and prejudices and how other people look at Jews – it affected me when I was little to never want to partake in Jewish life. I missed so many years of community because I did not want people to find out that I was Jewish, and I know that many feel that way. I meet Jews all the time in Malmö who have never been a part of the whole community because they feel that it is embarrassing to tell people that they are Jews, since you have grown up with everything you hear. Rebecka, 20 years old

The pupils describe a distance and alienation from their own minority culture that exclusion creates in them. Rubin (2020) argues that Jews' internalised oppression can manifest in various ways, such as by showing disinterest in Jewish culture and heritage or denying one's own Jewish identity. Branfman (2019) emphasises that an avoidance of publicly showing one's Judaism is about a desire to "pass" as being part of the majority society, in this case as an "ordinary Swede". This is visible in the pupils' accounts of minimising incidents, questioning the value of Jewish community life, or "regretting" being Jewish, which become ways of shrinking themselves in relation to a hostile or indifferent environment. This desire is a consequence of the need to avoid being exposed to racism. The degree of integration that the Jewish group has in society can, in this way, also be perceived as resulting from an involuntary assimilation, forced by the threat of antisemitism, to which all generations of Jews after the Holocaust have had to relate.

Discussion and conclusions

This study deepens the understanding of the situation of Jewish adolescents in a city like Malmö by illustrating how the problems associated with being a young Jew in Malmö's educational system must be understood in a multifaceted and contextual manner. In the experiences of the Jewish youth, vulnerability and exclusion appear as two sides of the same coin. The interviews show how the marginalisation of Jewish life, traditions, and Jewish–Swedish history shapes individual identity work: feeling excluded and exposed introduces the possibility, and sometimes the necessity, of distancing oneself from a Jewish identity in order to be recognised and avoid the consequences of racism. The findings confirm and extend previous research on minority pupils in Nordic and European schools. Like studies of Muslim pupils in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, the Jewish pupils in this study describe how formally "neutral" school environments are structured around a secular – Lutheran norm that renders minority traditions invisible while marking them as "Other" when they do appear. Read through CRT and HebCrit, these patterns illustrate how liberal educational ideals coexist with racialised hierarchies in which Jewishness is positioned as either absent or exotic, and where antisemitic "jokes" and stereotypes are normalised in peer cultures. At the same time, the echoes of Moulin's (2016), Gross and Rutland's (2014), and Thomas's (2016) findings suggest that the Malmö case is not an outlier but part of a broader, transnational configuration in which schools struggle to recognise antisemitism as a specific form of racism. The findings also correlate with those of Kittelmann Flensner (2015), who describes the Swedish school as a paradox between secularism in teaching and multireligiosity amongst the pupils. Schools that highlight both Christianity and secularism do not recognise "Otherised" religions' particularities. The "Other" is often constructed as exotic, and their religion is not seen as plural, dynamic, and evolving (Poulter et al., 2016). This phenomenon underlines the status of the dominant group and creates exclusion, stigma, and discrimination.

This study has limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample is small and purposive, consisting of 14 pupils recruited through the Jewish congregation and a Jewish youth organisation in Malmö, which means that it primarily reflects the experiences of young people for whom Jewish identity is salient and community life relatively accessible. The focus on one city and one type of data – interviews – limits the possibilities for triangulation with other sources such as classroom observations, teacher interviews or policy analysis. The findings therefore primarily illuminate mechanisms and patterns that require further investigation in other settings and with additional methods.

The results have implications for both educational practice and further studies. They can shed light on the specific experience of the Jewish group, with its unique positionality vis-à-vis whiteness and the processes of Europeanisation. The construction of privileged and "Otherised" positions is always situational, contextual, and intersectional (Poulter et al., 2016). The use of CRT and HebCrit has enabled a structural reading of the pupils' narratives, highlighting how their experiences are shaped by racialised norms and institutional practices, within broader processes of racial

Europeanisation in a Nordic, secular-Lutheran context. At the same time, these frameworks also have limitations in relation to the data. CRT has rarely been applied to Jews and antisemitism, and both CRT and HebCrit have largely been developed in other national settings; using them to analyse the Jewish minority in Sweden risks downplaying differences, and there is a need for further conceptual development in relation to the Nordic context. Nevertheless, this article suggests that CRT can be productively extended to Jewish experiences and that HebCrit, as an emerging perspective, offers a useful lens for tracing both parallels and divergences between antisemitism and racism directed at other groups. Therefore, this article underlines the importance of continuing the development of CRT, to understand better the processes of racialisation of Jews and the intersections of liberalism, race, and Europeanization in relation to the Jewish minority in Europe.

The findings can also be considered in relation to the on-going debates surrounding multiculturalism and universalism in schools and point to several concrete implications for educational policy and practice. At the level of school climate, there is a need for systematic work to strengthen minority pupils' sense of safety and positive identity. Teacher education and in-service training should address antisemitism explicitly, develop tools for responding to antisemitic slurs, and build understanding of how generationally transmitted trauma can shape pupils' perceptions of risk. Curricular and didactic work is also required: religious education and teaching materials should represent contemporary Jewish life in Sweden in non-stereotypical ways, teaching about the Holocaust should be linked to antisemitism today, and classroom practices should avoid positioning individual pupils as representatives or "answer keys" for their minority group. Finally, a more critical engagement with Swedishness, national history and the position of national minorities in the curriculum could help make visible the majority structures that currently render Jewish pupils both hyper-visible and invisible in school.

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