

Recognising, Naming, and Resisting Racialisation and Ethnicisation in Swedish Compulsory Schools

Reconocer, Nombrar y Resistirse a la Racialización y la Etnización en las Escuelas Obligatorias Suecas

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ABSTRACT:

Swedish schools and teachers are responsible for implementing policies that promote social justice. Based on qualitative data from observations, interviews and students' reflections and perspectives on intersectionality, the study critically analyses how students and school staff participate in the ethnicised and racialised oppression of Swedish compulsory school students. The interplay between different bodies in the school context and children's capacity to resist oppression is of particular interest. The findings suggest that oppression and control of body space based on ethnicity and race are often intertwined with different power structures, such as social and economic background, age, religion and masculinity. In addition, the silence of the majority plays a crucial role in perpetuating oppression. However, students who experience oppression have the capacity to resist the coercive power of their peers and adults. The article suggests that students and school staff should increase their capacity to recognise and identify oppressive power dynamics in their local contexts. By developing these skills, individuals can reflect on their role in perpetuating oppression, performatively open up new possibilities, and learn how to take transformative action and promote social justice.

DESCRIPTORES:

Justicia social
Educación antiopresiva
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Etnización
Racismo

RESUMEN:

Las escuelas y los profesores suecos son responsables de aplicar medidas que promuevan la justicia social. Basándose en datos cualitativos procedentes de observaciones, entrevistas y reflexiones y perspectivas de los alumnos sobre la interseccionalidad, el estudio analiza críticamente cómo los alumnos y el personal escolar participan en la opresión étnica y racial de los alumnos suecos de enseñanza obligatoria. La interacción entre los diferentes cuerpos en los contextos escolares y las capacidades agentivas de los niños para resistirse a la opresión es de especial interés. Las conclusiones indican que la opresión y el control del espacio corporal basados en la etnia y la raza suelen estar entrelazados con diversas estructuras de poder, como el origen social y económico, la edad, la religión y la masculinidad. Además, el silencio de la mayoría desempeña un papel crucial en la perpetuación de la opresión. Sin embargo, los alumnos que sufren opresión tienen la capacidad de resistir el poder coercitivo de sus compañeros y de los adultos. El artículo propone que se anime a los estudiantes y al personal escolar a mejorar su capacidad para reconocer e identificar las dinámicas de poder opresivas dentro de sus contextos locales. Al desarrollar estas competencias, los individuos pueden reflexionar sobre su papel en la perpetuación de la opresión, abrir performativamente nuevas posibilidades y aprender a emprender acciones transformadoras y a potenciar la justicia social.

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1. Introduction

Among Swedish policymakers and researchers, there has been a rising interest in education in and about social justice and the empowerment of children (Brantefors & Quennerstedt, 2016; Quennerstedt, 2022). While the focus has been on awareness of and learning and teaching about these issues, there is a growing need for more research about children's agency and how critical evaluation of lived experiences may enact anti-oppressive action. Anti-oppressive action and education are understood as a way of promoting and addressing social justice (Kumashiro, 2000). This article focuses on examples of ethnic and racial oppression directed towards compulsory school students in a large Swedish city, highlighting responsive resistance and the possibility of change.

The aim is to demonstrate the processes and individual actions of resisting and sustaining ethnicised and racialised oppression, as well as how institutionally initiated inquiry into and understanding of oppressive norms and behaviour in local school contexts can be employed to identify, understand, name, resist and transform oppressive social order in school contexts, thereby achieving normative goals set by legislation (e.g., Hellstadius, 2023; UN, 2007). The term 'oppression' is used to describe marginalisation, discrimination, harassment, and other forms of exclusionary othering that reinforce inequalities in social relationships in educational contexts (Ahmed, 2012). Kumashiro (2000, p. 25), following Freire, defines oppression as "a situation or dynamic in which certain ways of being (e.g., having certain identities) are privileged in society whereas others are marginalised". Such an exercise of power implies a failure to recognise somebody as a subject, consequently interfering with the individual's "vocation to be more fully human" (Freire, 2018, p. 55). The primary research questions are: How is racialised and ethnicised oppression directed towards compulsory school students experienced, resisted, and reproduced in local school contexts? How do described oppressive power relationships contribute to the organisation of 'body space'? How can a critical understanding of and inquiry into oppression in a local educational context be used as a form of anti-oppressive education?

The concept of body space refers to the orientation of and interaction between different bodies in a specific context, as well as the constitution of meaning and action attributed to a specific body and space (Puwar, 2004). While bodies take shape through performative interactions between individuals, "[s]paces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157). In Emirbayer and Mische's (1998, p. 964) words, by "examining changes in agentic orientation, we can gain crucial analytical leverage for charting varying degrees of manoeuvrability, inventiveness, and reflective choice shown by social actors in relation to the constraining and enabling contexts of action."

The qualitative empirical data, consisting of students' written reflections on personal experiences of oppression, participatory observations, and teacher interviews, were collected in collaboration with a municipal school development department tasked with enhancing social justice. Educators and school developers from the department collected the majority of the data during their interventions, explorations, inquiries, and reflections on oppression in compulsory schools in a Swedish municipality. Thus, we also get an insight into the department's social justice work.

1.1. Schools as the spaces of power negotiation

Schools are in this article interpreted as social spaces that enable the analysis and understanding of practices of oppression, privileging, (re)production of social hierarchy, negotiation of power, children's agency and transformative learning and change (Martinsson & Reimers, 2020). León Rosales (2010) emphasises that analysis of othering and other exclusionary differentiations makes visible boundary setting through which individuals are understood and becomes understandable. Consequently, oppressive processes permeating educational institutions mark limits of who one can be and become. Understanding institutional life and order requires viewing those who dwell there as the experts and agents in their (institutional/ised) life (Ahmed, 2021). Although oppressive boundary-making is defended, legitimised, and consolidated by students and adults, boundaries are not static but rather negotiated, perforated, and relegated, not least since schools are central agents in empowerment for social change and liable for the implementation of social justice (hooks, 2010; Kumashiro, 2000; Quennerstedt, 2022). Consequently, it is of paramount importance to analyse the situations and ways students react as active agents in resistance to oppression in educational institutions.

1.2. Race-related oppression is just one form of several

In educational institutions and other settings, oppressive power does not affect all individuals and groups equally. The latest report on students' experiences of 'hate crime' (defined as criminal acts motivated by negative attitudes towards an individual's sexual orientation, skin colour, ethnicity and religion) reveals that while 6% of 'Swedish-born' students (those with both parents born in Sweden) have personally experienced hate crime, over one-third of students with a 'migrant background' (either themselves born or having at least one parent born outside Sweden) have been victims of 'hate crime' (Brå, 2021). Skin colour, nationality, and ethnic background or a combination of them are the most prominent forms of 'hate crime'.

When discussing racism in Sweden, we must acknowledge the paradoxical and parallel Swedish realities. On the one hand, many students point to their personal experiences of racialisation (León Rosales & Jonsson, 2019; Lundström, 2021). On the other hand, there is a structural sanctioning of colour blindness and colour muteness, whereby race is rejected and silenced as "a concept and as a category" and, at least officially, made "irrelevant and obsolete" (Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009, p. 335). In fact, not only does the Swedish Discrimination Act exclude race as a basis for discrimination, but there is a governmental decision to erase the word 'race' from all existing legislation in Sweden (Osanami Törngren, 2015). In its place, ethnicity and culture, supposedly colourblind concepts, are used to scrutinise racism, anti-racism, and racialisation. These understandings govern how individuals, groups, institutions, and society name, understand and tackle oppression. According to Ahmed (2012) and Pollock (2004), the term 'racism' in the UK and the US is perceived as threatening to whiteness and is often replaced with 'diversity' or similar terms that are considered less threatening. Both researchers believe that critical perspectives on racialisation and racism should not be silenced in public discourses and institutional settings. Instead, they argue that change requires making the existence of racism and other forms of oppression visible.

It is important to underline that race-related oppression is only one form of oppression discussed here. Educational institutions are social spaces where individuals across ethnic and religious backgrounds, birthplace, age, gender, and other categorisations regularly interact (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). The development of an awareness of the intersectionality of power can lead to new agentic orientations and social change

(hooks, 2010; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Without a more comprehensive understanding of how educational institutions and those residing in them are a part of (re)production of oppression, inequality, resistance, and power negotiation, it is difficult to achieve social justice (Kumashiro, 2000; Martinsson & Reimers, 2020).

1.3. Norms privilege certain bodies but are transformative

In light of the prior discussion, it is essential to clarify the concepts of norms/normativity and oppression and to demonstrate why it is crucial to examine oppressive power in compulsory education in a critical manner. The analytical starting point is Freire's (2018), and Kumashiro's (2000) view that the central aim of education is to critically analyse, understand and transform the dynamics of oppressive social order, norms, and power that hinder subjectivity and transformative action.

The concept of norms and normativity is concerned with the taken-for-granted rules, agentic actions (e.g., dichotomising interpellations and performative acts), as well as ideas about what is socially desirable and normalising on the one hand and deviant and problematic/problematised on the other (Ahmed, 2012). According to Ahmed (2017, p. 115), “[n]ot to inhabit a norm (or not quite to inhabit a norm) can be experienced as not dwelling so easily where you reside”. Normativity thus regulates behaviour, who has power and who is disempowered, regarded as a problem, or silenced, and which lifestyles, bodies, and identities occupy a privileged position in a specific social context and/or society. The regulatory power of norms influences how a subject should (not) be, behave, dress, or look or who is regarded as institutionally desirable. Normative interpellations and practices are thus subjectifying, and they expose emotions that centre around certain individuals (Ahmed, 2017; Lozić, 2010; Martinsson & Reimers, 2020). However, although the surrounding society shapes identities, they are not determined by it because societal power structures are transformative. This is particularly evident in their intersectional, interpersonal, and performative nature, which may lead to disruption, renegotiation, reinterpretation, and questioning (Butler, 1999; Dolk, 2013). The concept of intersectionality denotes the interdependence and intertwining of power axes, including but not limited to ethnicity, skin colour, religion, gender, sexuality, class, age and so forth. This implies that power is context-dependent and neither linear nor unidirectional, but rather complex, inter-relational, contradictory, fluid, and changeable (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

1.4. Analytical points of departure

The analysis of oppressive behaviour and normative categorisations reveals uneven social order and agentic potentiality for change (Pollock, 2004). I identify oppression as a phenomenological issue because phenomenology stresses the significance of lived experiences and the importance of “repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 544). As individuals engage in a dialogical and performative process in which they “respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life”, they also distance themselves “(at least in partial exploratory ways) from the schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984). By analysing the intersection of power axes, it is possible to identify the acts of responsiveness, resistance, normalisation, relegation, or marginalisation of certain bodies in social contexts. In other words, because bodies are viewed as surfaces on which normative power is projected – implying that individual orientation towards other bodies ‘does things’ with these bodies – I focus on the descriptions of ways performative acts and verbal interpellations position bodies, shape them, entailing imaginative responsiveness to problematic situations.

Orientation implies a space of (inter)action, spatial distribution of bodies, and calling/interpellation (Puwar, 2004). The analysis of orientation makes visible alignment, contesting and maintaining boundaries between normative and non-normative bodies, social interactions and the societal meaning given to the bodies. Analysis can reveal how bodies are directed towards those perceived as either 'normative' or 'failed' and how 'failed' bodies are reoriented towards normativity. Furthermore, this encompasses resistance to these processes. Thus, in this study, I employ phenomenology to examine the processes by which bodies acquire and actively engage in orientation by naming, actions, feelings, judgments, aspirations, social pressure and resistance. Orientation is not neutral but rather "the point from which the world unfolds: the 'here' of the body, and the 'where' of its dwelling" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 151).

The experiences of being recognised as 'out of place'/'not belonging' in educational institutions affect individuals (Ahmed, 2012). Consequently, this article does not merely describe oppressive situations but also illustrates emotions, hierarchies, differentiations, identity formation, and resistance resulting from the projection of social norms onto certain bodies. Finally, after describing in which ways oppressive orientation affects individuals and how it produces social order and action, I discuss how the recognition of, naming and resisting oppression may be used to disrupt, challenge, and change oppressive power (Ahmed, 2017; Basner et al., 2018). Hence, the conclusion is about new possibilities.

2. Qualitative research methods

A qualitative research approach was adopted based on an interest in the intersectional and subjectifying nature of power, which involves the coexistence of oppression and resistance (Mejia-Elvir et al., 2023). Qualitative empirical data, founded on ethnographic research principles, were collected in compulsory schools located in so-called 'immigrant dense', socioeconomically disadvantaged and 'vulnerable' areas of a large city in Sweden (Dahlstedt & Lozić, 2017). In public discourses, the areas where schools are located represent an antithesis of what Ahmed (2007, p. 135) calls "white spaces". The data were collected through cooperation with a municipal school development department. Through this collaboration, I was granted access to various initiatives that shared a common aim: to promote social justice and uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In order to understand the school developers' mapping and analysis of oppressive power structures and social relationships, as well as their initiatives to prevent and tackle oppression directed towards students, a multimethod approach was employed. This study is embedded in the work of the municipal school development department and is coproduced with teachers, school developers and compulsory school students. School developers, students, teachers, and other school staff are regarded as experts on institutional life in schools (Ahmed, 2012, 2021).

The empirical data (Table 1) comprises four sources: i) interviews with four teachers, ii) two participant observations of meetings where management staff and school developers discussed oppressive social relationships at the school where the interviewed teachers worked, iii) written reflections from compulsory school students about their experiences of oppression, and iv) an observation made by a teacher during a professional learning community (PLC). The qualitative empirical data were collected between 2018 and 2021.

Table 1***Data analysed in the article***

Type of data	No.	Year
Teacher interviews	4 interviews	2018-2019
Observations of meetings between management staff and school developers	2 meeting observations	2018
Student reflections: Workshop facilitator's descriptions of students' reflections on personal experiences of oppression	24 students' reflections	2018
Published student articles about reflections on personal experiences of oppression	1 published article written by 'Rebecka'	2021
A teacher's observations conducted during PLC	1 teacher's observation	2019

The multimethod approach enables a nuanced understanding of the anti-oppressive work conducted at the school development department and multifaceted perspectives on racialisation and ethnicisation. All identifying information has been anonymised, and all empirical data was collected in accordance with ethical principles outlined by the Swedish research agency (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). The author translated the empirical data from Swedish to English with the assistance of the AI tool DeepL.

As part of a municipal large-scale and cross-sectorial social justice project, students attended workshops led by the school development department. The workshop focused on oppression and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and students learned to identify oppression using an analytical framework based on Freire's (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. They were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of oppression and to share them with others, and they were taught to write and publish articles about oppression. A significant number of students shared their articles on a social media platform designed to facilitate the democratic and political participation of young people. While the project collected and published a multitude of personal articles on the platform, only one student article, published by 'Rebecka' in 2021, is analysed in this study. Additionally, 24 short student reflections, collected by a workshop facilitator from the department, were presented to the author in 2018.

In addition to students' reflections, I observed two meetings between school management staff (consisting of a school counsellor and principal) and department representatives. Observations at the meetings were conducted by the author in 2018. After the observations, I conducted individual and focus group interviews with four teachers at the school. The focus was on examples of everyday school relationships. The interviews were conducted to complement the school management's viewpoints. In 2019, a teacher observed exclusionary social interactions between adults and students during a PLC I co-led with a municipal school development department member. During PLC, participants received training in inquiry-based learning, research ethics and 'anti-oppressive education'. My role was that of a facilitator, researcher and theoretical expert.

3. Many faces of oppression

The analysis begins by discussing experiences of racism and the ability to respond to it, as narrated by a twelve-year-old student. It then proceeds to examine the intersection between migration, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, whiteness, gender, and religious norms. While the initial themes focus on the oppressive power

relationships amongst students, the analysis ends with critical perspectives on negotiating power between an adult and a student.

3.1. Naming racism in a Swedish educational context

I am a [twelve-year-old] child who has experienced racism several times since I was in preschool. /.../ When I was around six years old and had just started school, I was subjected to racism. /.../ I got many questions such as, "Why is your hair so thick?", "Why are you dark and not pale?" and "Why do you have such thick lips?". I assumed that they were being mean because, at that time, I didn't know what racism was. /.../ Once, I was asked, "Why are you dark-skinned people not slaves today?" I didn't want to take this, but my heart did. /.../ Even though I had friends who supported me, /.../ I still felt alone because no one in my grade looked like me. /.../ I always thought I would change and become paler as I got older. I felt that if you could get tanned in a solarium, you could get paler, too. I would be just like 'everyone else'. I know I am not the only one with these thoughts and that many children worldwide still think they should be like 'everyone else' – that is, like the perfect people. /.../ In the 5th grade, it started again when a guy called me the N-word. /.../ It felt like a stomach punch, and tears were streaming down my face. One thing that made me happy was all the support I received from the teachers and my fellow students. /.../ The point [I want to make] is that you must reflect on what you are saying. We must all put an end to racism and anti-Semitism together¹. (Rebecka, 2021)

Rebecka rejects a passive stance and instead creates evolving images of the future, which she uses to construct the changing images of where she believes 'we' have been, where 'we' should go, and how 'we' can get there from where 'we' are at present. Indeed, her reflection evokes "a desirous imagination to problems that cannot satisfactorily be resolved by the taken-for-granted habits of thought and action that characterise the background structure of the social world" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984).

On the one hand, Rebecka's longstanding experience of racism has evoked emotional pain, stress, insecurity, mental colonisation of whiteness norms from an early age, 'colourism' (oppression related to skin tone, hair texture etc.), racial self-hatred and loneliness (Pyke, 2010; Russell-Cole et al., 2013). On the other hand, her past experiences, including the transformative learning during the municipal educational project to enhance social justice, have conditioned her present action, enabling her to recognise the power and potentiality of critical reflexivity, naming, collective support and resistance (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Indeed, Rebecka's exposure to and learning about oppression has led her to articulate the necessity to reorganise and reconstitute her own, others', and institutionalised understandings, habits, and situations. This enables her to open a new possibility to shape and reconstruct the future. An important lesson to be made from Rebecka's reflection is the importance of recognising the potential of those residing in local contexts (e.g., students and school staff) as imaginative and critical agents of change and experts on institutional life. This entails empowering them to name the world and actively participate in change (e.g., challenging colourblind understanding of other students' "mean" behaviour). Given that the educational intervention and transformative co-learning project she participated in, which resulted in her publishing her personal experience, is inspired by

¹ Rebecka's narrative was published on a social media platform aiming to empower and develop young people's media and information literacy. It was written during a large-scale anti-oppression educational project organised by the school development department.

Paulo Freire's theories, it is not surprising that her message echoes Freire's (2018) argument that:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false worlds, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, and in action-reflection. (p. 88)

The act of noticing, writing down, sharing, critically analysing, and naming are vital for reflexive inquiry, co-learning, collaborative engagement, and transformation. These processes may reorient individuals and expand their horizons of future action, potentially transforming the social and institutional order (Fullan et al., 2018; Timperley, 2011).

Rebecka's account, collected, published, and publicly voiced in a crosssectorial anti-oppressive educational intervention and transformative co-learning project, discloses several issues addressed in this article. In particular, the significance of institutionally organised inquiry and critical analysis of oppressive behaviour (including wording) directed towards compulsory school students. By identifying normative discourses about desirable bodies, privileging and Othering, as well as the effects of power structures on individuals and social order in a local school context – which, in the case of twelve-year-old Rebecka, resulted in a desire to alter her identity, fit in with whiteness norms and resist racist oppression – it is possible to highlight what needs to be changed, and consequently induce change (Fullan et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2019). The following section will examine the intertwined nature of migration, socioeconomic stratification, and skin colour.

3.2. Intersecting migration, socioeconomic stratification, and whiteness norms

Researchers have time and again pointed out that urban spaces, similar to those under investigation in this study, are frequently featured in Swedish media, as well as social and political discourses. These discourses typically associate these spaces with immigration, poverty, language difficulties, unemployment, cultural and religious deviance, and obsolete gender norms (Bunar, 2011; Dahlstedt & Lozić, 2017; Gruber, 2007). These processes of othering, problem framing, and stigmatisation do not stop at the structural level; rather, they extend to outsiders' views of these urban areas and their inhabitants. These views are internalised by those who inhabit these stigmatised urban areas.

According to observations made by school staff, students, with the aim of “lowering” each other, often call each other “R-child” (R referring to “refugee”) or use “an Arabic word for tramp” as a metaphor for an individual who has a migration background and is “worth nothing, owns nothing, has no talent, simply a loser” (Observation from a meeting between staff and school developers, 2018). Similarly, an immigrant is, according to junior high school students, labelled as somebody who “does not speak Swedish” and is at the sub-ground level (e.g., in “the cellar”) of the social hierarchy (Student Reflections 2018).

Such oppressive language is evident in the social relationships between students of all ages. In their reflection on the social problems at school, eight-year-old students have highlighted the need for an end to “teasing on the grounds of appearance and skin colour”, as well as for their classmates to “stop offending each other on the grounds of skin colour, language, religion, background, and nationality” (Student reflections

2018). Furthermore, one of the schoolteachers is concerned about the intersection between socioeconomic and racialised norms and exclusionary processes that permeate relationships between pupils:

The skin colour is highlighted here. / ... / "You're brown as shit, and I do not want to play with someone who is brown!". [Pupils] may say that! The shades are there, so if you come from a 'better' family, you are higher up [in the hierarchy], academics versus working-class families. (Teacher Interview 2019)

The teacher's argument that the entanglement of skin colour and educational/socioeconomic background is one of the students' orientation axes suggests that body space is allocated so that some bodies are relegated while others are viewed as desirable playmates.

3.3. Fit in with religious norms

Navigating between norms is a complex and conflictual process influenced by the surrounding environment's normalising gaze, aspiration to fit in and external social pressure. There is compelling evidence that religion, in conjunction with other power structures, impacts the normative organisation of body space in schools.

We see and hear arguments that every other thing is haram [forbidden by some interpretations of Islam]. It's something they have learned at home / ... / Christmas is such a [conflicting] holiday - it is enough that one student spreads rumours that everything on the table is haram, then no one else wants to eat the food. Or, that a specific dish is a haram, [the student] gets a whole group drawing to his side. Or that a teacher who carries a baby in her womb is haram. (Teacher Interview 2019)

The teacher's account indicates that regulatory norms are closely linked with gender norms (the marginalisation of pregnant female bodies), students' challenging of adults, the predominant position of Islam in the local urban context, and the normative status of Christianity in Sweden as a whole. In fact, in the local context, most students identify themselves with Sweden, the Middle East, and Islam. Hence, this account discloses several dichotomising interpellations that students (and teachers) need to navigate within: religious/irreligious, school/home, Muslim/Christian, Swedish official holidays/local religious preferences, we/them, teacher/student, adult/child, haram/halal as well as the question of gender-related issues. This constant re/orientation amongst norms produces pressure "to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of life, and even to reproduce that life for everybody" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 555). As these conflictual and dichotomising processes resonate in the school context, they also regulate relationships at the school. For instance, a pregnant teacher's possibility to establish positive relations with students who regard pregnant female bodies as 'haram' is affected by these processes.

This leads me to the coercing regulation and spatial dispersion of female bodies and these power structures' entanglement with normative masculinity, 'honour culture,' and religion. School staff have identified cultural norms that encourage some male students, already at an early age, to demand social and spatial separation based on gender dichotomy and endorse "macho culture" and religious views. For instance, teachers have stated that some students "do not want to sit next to a girl [because] it is haram to sit next to a girl" (Interviews 2018, 2019). For these male students, norms appear to define both religious conduct and what a "macho man may and may not be allowed to do," justifying segregation of body space.

Another recurring and related theme when staff discuss oppressive norms affecting students in the school context is the "culture of honour".

There is an honour culture [here]. [Students] may agree with [teachers] that everyone should have the same rights and be allowed to behave as they want to. However, when it comes to their sisters, if they were to go out with someone, this is not permitted. So, if a girl is together with another guy, she is suddenly expelled from the group. (Observation from a Meeting 2018)

Similarly, interviewed teachers claim that although it may be socially acceptable to discuss equal rights of women and men in the classroom, with regards to one's own female family members, some male students regard equality as a threat to gender norms, hierarchies, family reputation and honour (Interviews with teachers 2018, 2019). The interviewed teachers argue that these oppressive viewpoints are used to justify gender-based control and separation in this local context. According to León-Rosales (2019, p. 117), many young people present themselves as tolerant and inclusive because they believe that tolerance in educational contexts and elsewhere has “a moral and cultural superiority, namely that of being a good person, or a good citizen”. Nevertheless, while tolerance and respect may be performatively displayed in front of teachers, respectability is in other situations marked by control and separation of, threats to, and harassment of female bodies in the name of honour and religion (Strid et al., 2021). These accounts disclose not only processes of negation, stigmatisation, and Othering used in student interactions but also situational contingency of what is regarded as socially desirable and privileged.

While the empirical examples make boundary settings, social norms, and stratification visible, oppressive normative behaviour does not pass unchallenged. As the following observation demonstrates, through different forms of resistance and power negotiation, students may challenge normative boundaries of body space and even receive support from others.

3.4. The regulatory position of adults

In recent years, Swedish researchers have observed the negotiation of power between adults and preschool and school children (Dolk, 2013; Högberg, 2009; Lozić, 2022; Lozić et al., 2020). Instead of viewing them as passive recipients of norms about citizen formation and socialisation, school and preschool children are increasingly viewed as active agents who influence their social lives and actively shape body space.

While previous examples have demonstrated the pervasiveness of oppression in student relationships, the subsequent observation from a school library illustrates the embeddedness of generational and occupational power.

Jordan [the teacher] is with the students in the school library to monitor the students and the whole situation there. The librarian has on several occasions stated that they think that some of the students are loud and cannot follow library rules. On the other hand, the students say that the librarian offends them. A grade eight student sits on the library floor, and Jordan does not feel that the student is disturbing anyone but might be in the way. The librarian then tells [the student sitting on the floor], “You should not sit on the floor like a Gypsy”. This is overheard by several students, including one who identifies as Roma. The child who was initially addressed does not react much, but Jordan, and particularly the student with a Roma identity, tells the librarian that they cannot say so. The librarian responds, “What then?! Gypsies sit on the ground and beg”. Then the student with Roma identity says, “It’s called Roma, and it’s not true that all Roma beg!” Jordan tries to explain to the librarian how inappropriate this is, but the answer Jordan gets is, “But it’s true!” (Teacher’s Observation 2019)

The library floor represents a space of habitual action and reaction (i.e., allocation, invasion, alignment, and resistance) and discloses the normative and relational dimensions of body space. As the student sitting on/occupying the floor is breaking

the taken-for-granted and unreflective bodily action, it becomes a body out of place. Indeed, while spaces and bodies are mutually constituted, performative acts of rule-breaking and resistance enact reactions and enable (unpredictable) change (Puwar, 2004). Put more simply, while normative lines are usually invisible when a student is aligned with the norms of bodily space, owing to 'deviant behaviour', students shift from being in the background to being in the foreground and frontline.

By 'removing' the sitting body from the space (floor), the librarian attempts to align the space with norms and re-establish a familiar order based on the repetition of bodily actions over time (Ahmed, 2006). With the aim of alignment, the librarian draws upon xenophobic, racialised and ethnicised discourses and stereotyping based on the anti-Roma sentiment, which has a long history in European societies and social relationships (Selling, 2014). However, this enacts re/action. As the student with Roma identity 'snaps' by speaking out and questioning the librarian's regulative power, the student positions himself as a 'killjoy' figure who alters the normative space (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed defines the concept of 'snap' as a multifaceted phenomenon depicting an event, spatial distribution, wording, or feeling that affects an individual, thereby making them aware of their subjection. In addition to signifying a transformative experience or a tipping point that prompts a re-evaluation of one's self-perception and interactions with others, the term 'snap' is also employed to describe a method of resistance, voicing and public naming experiences of oppression, complaining, and change-making. Consequently, the snap and other forms of responsive action are simultaneously both a form of anti-oppressive action and a subjectifying experience (Basner et al., 2018; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

By refusing to remain silent, disrupting the status quo and claiming the power to oppose, the student opens the body space to transformation and the potential for new possibilities (Lozić et al., 2020; Dolk, 2013). In accordance with Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 973), it can be argued that the manner in which individuals "understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present makes a difference to their actions". It is noteworthy that despite the resistance by the teacher (an adult) and the 'killjoy' student (a child), the majority of students (including the student who is instructed to stop sitting on the floor) remain silent *actors* throughout the incident. Silence is far from a neutral act because it perpetuates and reproduces the librarian's generational, occupational, ethnicised and racialised organisation of body space and power (Castagno, 2008; Lozić, 2022). Going against the limiting 'brick wall' enacted by the adult librarian and permeated by anti-Roma sentiment may be challenging, energy-draining, and painful, particularly as the student risks losing his privileged position of being unnoticed/in the background. Nevertheless, the student (child) gathers strength and courage to distance himself and speak out against the peers' silent reproduction of oppression and the adult librarian's socially, temporally, and spatially directed oppression (Castagno, 2008). This performative act of resistance opens the space between the actors, perforates and disturbs the institutional(ised) order and transforms the status quo of silence. By resisting and disrupting social order and power structures, the student "contributes to the revitalisation of democracy in the school" (Dolk, 2013, p. 241).

4. Discussion and conclusions

As silencing is an essential part of the exercise and reproduction of oppression (Ahmed, 2021; Lozić et al., 2020), this article has focused on articulating and critically understanding different forms of oppression in compulsory schools in a large city in

Sweden. A number of examples demonstrate the intersection between whiteness, migration, and ethnicity, as well as power axes related to age, gender, socioeconomic resources, honour, and religion. These examples also suggest that adults and students are involved in oppressive boundary setting and relegation of individuals and groups. In line with Dolk (2013, p. 241), I have demonstrated that disruptive behaviour, critical naming and resistance “serve as reminders of other possibilities”. The question of how to organise anti-oppressive education remains unresolved. Given that every theoretical and educational framework is partial, it is not my intention to provide an absolute solution to the question of how to organise anti-oppressive education. Instead, my intention is to explore potential avenues for enhancing social justice.

As Kumashiro (2000) notes, one frequently promoted perspective in the field of education is the idea of education about the Other. Developing and teaching ‘tolerance’ and empathy towards the Other has been and continues to be a highly pronounced and normative anti-oppressive perspective in Swedish education (Björkman et al., 2021; Landmann & Månsson, 2016). The objective is to teach about alternative (Other/ed) modes of living and being. While education about the Other positions normative students as in need of developing tolerance towards, understanding of and empathy for the ‘Other’, it has been criticised for being depoliticising, reinforcing essentialism, marginalisation, and othering and for not focusing on norms and structures that contribute to oppression (Kumashiro, 2000; Skolverket, 2009). However, this criticism is too simplistic (Björkman et al., 2021; Landmann & Månsson, 2016). As previously demonstrated, education about the Other/ed cannot and should not be separated from the critical analysis of and education about oppression, *per se*. Education about and for the Other/ed needs to be entangled into critical analysis and understanding of the processes of privileging and Othering and of one's role in these processes.

It is not sufficient for education to solely focus on the inclusion of Othered voices and experiences of their oppression since all individuals must be able to live and practice their rights (e.g., UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 2007)). The ability to demand the implementation of the rights and to recognise and act against oppression are central elements of anti-oppressive education. Indeed, Freire (2018), Kumashiro (2000), and Ahmed (2017) have emphasised the importance of exploring and sharing significant experiences of oppression and of developing critical and emancipatory agency so that one can engage in dialogue with others, name the world, act upon the knowledge about the world, and transform it. It can be posited that Rebecka, whose account opens the analysis, may have ‘snapped’ earlier if only she had collectively learned how to identify and react to oppression (racism) or had she been oriented towards others with similar experiences and with whom she could have shared anger about oppression and strategies for action (cf. Kumashiro, 2000). Although Ahmed (2017) asserts that empowering Othered individuals to speak out and rehearse their refusal to comply with norms is an important issue, it is also challenging to create an adequate free space for everyone because power structures are fluid and intersecting, which makes it difficult to unite individuals and persuade them to work together towards common goals and interests. Furthermore, it is challenging to organise such a space when no other students have similar experiences and viewpoints on oppression (cf. Rebecka's account and library situation). There is also a risk that the Othered are left alone and forced to gather courage and strength in their solitude.

This brings me to my main concluding point, namely the importance of collective and collaborative development of all students, teachers, and school leaders' critical analysis of privileges, oppression and normative ideas as well as their effects (Björkman et al.,

2021; Martinsson & Reimers, 2020). It is argued that critical questioning and resistance to the contextualised forms of oppression in everyday relationships allow “us to break ties that are damaging as well as to invest in new possibilities” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 162). This may facilitate “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971; see also Mejia-Elvir et al., 2023). For instance, a critical analysis of the exercise of honour culture, oppressive gender norms, generational, racialised and ethnicised boundary-making, and the role of silence in reproducing oppression in the local context may lead to personal, institutional, and social change. It can be argued that to “surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its cause so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire, 2018, p. 47). However, this is not a simple task, as it requires individuals to leave their comfort zone and become subjects and agents of change. Personal and societal freedom may be achieved when one stops being “afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled” and when one is ready “to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them” and finally becomes committed to fighting oppression (Freire, 2018, p. 39).

The recognition, development of knowledge about, and understanding of processes of oppression, as well as their analyses and causes, and the voicing of opposition to the oppressive exercise of power may create new possibilities for transformative actions. By taking new performative turns and paths here and now, individuals may open the way for unpredictable possibilities (Kumashiro, 2000). It is, therefore, pertinent to consider the potential consequences of different courses of action. What if, rather than acquiescing to the prevailing silence, all students at the library had protested the librarian's anti-Roma citation and acted in an unpredictable and transformative manner? One such action might have been to occupy the library floor with their sitting bodies collectively. Ahmed (2017, p. 198) asserts that by “giving up a life that you are expected to live” (and which instils an imagined sense of temporary safety and security) and thus taking an unknown path, one is performatively opening new possibilities. Acting as a killjoy – or as Ahmed (2017, p. 199) puts it, “[b]y snapping you are saying: I will not reproduce a world I cannot bear, a world I do not think should be borne” – has a queering effect on constraining power and may open new possibilities. Ahmed posits that this performative breakage may be challenging and lonely and may lead to feelings of insecurity. Nevertheless, she maintains that snap, whether individual or collective, may be a means of transforming power structures (Ahmed, 2021). Finally, it is essential to note that there is no single, universally applicable model of anti-oppressive education. Rather, the most effective approach integrates a range of strategies. This may include enhancing knowledge about legislation and rights, sharing empowering and inspiring examples of resistance to oppression, and developing analytic skills, theoretical knowledge, and the ability and courage to disturb oppressive order.

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