"When I think about Shortfield, I think about mosquitos, and neo-Nazis": Students’ narratives of racism, sexism, and intolerance in rural Swedish schools

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Everyday racism
Institutional racism
Sexism
Neo-nazis
Mill towns
Education

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyse how young people living in geographical areas with a tradition of high neo-Nazi activism talk about racism and sexism, in particular, and the “school climate”, in general. Two schools situated in traditional rural mill towns were selected, and students (of ages 14-16) were interviewed. Influenced by Essed’s theory on everyday racism, the study addresses how micro and macro dimensions of racism intersect through the voices of the students, when they talk about their community, their school, and the visible traces or signs of the neo-Nazi movement. The results show a recurrence of everyday racism in the schools, and indicate that the expression of racism was largely taken for granted. Initially in the narratives the students talked about their school and community in terms of inclusion and social connectedness. As the discussions proceeded, quite a few examples of racist practices and verbal racist and sexist harassment were mentioned. Such expressions were often downplayed, such that everyday racism and sexism appeared to have been normalised. This apologetic stance also seemingly contributed to a “return of the repressed”, in the form of overt expressions of neo-Nazi symbols and acts in the school environment.

1. Introduction

In contrast to urban and multicultural areas, rural areas and schools situated in such areas have often been understood and described as mono-ethnic (Odenbring and Johansson, 2019). The image of urban areas has thus been one of cultural and demographic diversity, whereas rural areas have been considered largely in terms of a homogenous enterprise. Such polarised descriptions have, however, come to be questioned. With globalisation and immigration, the image of the rural landscape has come to connote increasingly diverse and multifaceted demographics (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014).

Local responses towards contemporary trends such as multiculturalism and changing demographics are highly varied, from so-called good examples of social integration, to communities marked by discrimination, ethnocentrism and racism. Indeed, studies of how immigrant students blend in and become integrated into predominantly “white schools” provide, for both rural and urban schools, a rather pessimistic view of social integration. Myers and Bhopal (2017), for example, found that in rural English schools with predominantly white students, racist behaviour was treated as a non-existent problem, and racist incidences were often trivialised by school officials, as something to be expected and not particularly problematised. Moreover, Nordic and international educational studies suggest that institutionalised racism and the reproduction of white hegemony are intrinsic parts of everyday contemporary life in schools in the Nordic countries (Hallgren 2005; Housse 2012; Dovemark 2013). While it is far from all schools that are characterised by a high presence of racism and intolerance, some clearly are.

This article uses data gathered through interviews with students in Swedish schools located in two rural areas that show a long tradition of racism and neo-Nazi presence and activism. In these traditional mill towns, originally built around a dominant industrial plant, in recent decades the selected areas/schools have experienced deindustrialisation and economic decline. They share a history of economic deprivation and low socio-economic standard. The selected areas also have a tradition of being meeting places for skinheads (in the 1990s) and neo-Nazi activists (in the early 2000s), and several leading neo-Nazi activists live or have lived in the areas (Mattsson and Johansson, 2020). Although the neo-Nazi party never has had any success in the elections in these local...
areas, there has been a constant presence of activism, and subcultural groups. Against this background, the aim of this study is to describe and analyse how students living in geographical rural areas with a tradition of high neo-Nazi activism understand and talk about racism and sexism, in particular, and the “school climate”, in general. We argue that schools in areas with a historically high presence of racism constitute interesting cases that yield rich and nuanced portraits of how racism may play out in certain geographical areas and how students navigate such a landscape of race intolerance. Put differently, in the selected schools the problem of racism was significant and recurrent, which made it possible to address young people’s understandings and discursive framing of everyday racism. The relationship between everyday racism and the historical and cultural context has been scarcely research, which is why this paper intend to contribute to the debate by paying attention to how the local communities’ past history of neo-Nazi activism may turn everyday racism into something more significant, that is potential radicalisation processes. The aim of the study was addressed through the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: How do the students talk about and describe the local rural context?
- **RQ2**: In what ways are racism and sexism, and intolerance and harassment generally, addressed and understood by the students?
- **RQ3**: Are there any visible traces, signs, or symbols of the neo-Nazi movement in the schools and in the students’ everyday life?

2. **Background and survey of the field**

In the scholarly debate it is well established that there are spatial patterns in the reproduction of racism, and that certain geographical areas can serve as strongholds for the reproduction of right-wing extremist and National Socialist milieus (Demker and Oskarsson 2012; Lööv 2015; Mattsson and Johansson, 2020). In a quantitative study, Blomback (2017) found significant correlations between an increased level of intolerance, measured by general phenomena such as aversion to democracy, xenophobia, racism, and a high degree of National Socialist activism in specific municipalities. Similarly, Cantoni et al. (2019), showed that the German municipalities with the strongest supporters of the Nazi party in 1933 have continued to be strongholds for right-wing extremism in present day. As evidence shows that certain geographical areas can serve as racist strongholds over time, it is reasonable to argue that schools’ mission to combat racism may be particularly challenging in such areas.

Since the Schools Commission of 1946, Swedish schools have been assigned the task of combatting racism. Since then, racism has been conceptualised differently at different times, from focusing on racist and dismissive opinions expressed by individuals, to identifying the role of racist structures embedded in society (Mattsson 2018). Regardless of how racism and other forms of intolerance have been understood, however, Swedish schools have been given the task of countering racism and intolerance while promoting social inclusion. The Swedish school curriculum has thus developed over the years to ensure that religious, ethnic and cultural diversity become part of the student experience. At the same time, it has been shown that schools in certain geographical and rural areas in Sweden still are dealing with expressions of racism and failing to recognise both the presence of racism and the value of diversity and equality (Mattsson and Johansson, 2022).

Currently, international research on how racism and sexism are played out in schools and among students is growing. Different studies tend to focus on varied aspects of the problem, ranging from the impact of societal structures on the school environment (Gillborn, 2021; Torhan 2021; Wei and Bunjan 2021) to schools’ incentives to counter everyday racism and sexism among students (Hallgren 2005; Zimmerman and Astor 2021), and the impact of racism on students’ health (Jenkins et al., 2015). Though expressed from different viewpoints, one commonality in the scholarly debate is, however, evidence suggesting that racism has continued to be a problem. Indeed, the ongoing normalisation of everyday racism has been documented in several studies (Essed 2001; Hallgren 2005; Bourabain and Verhaeghe 2021).

Myers and Bhopal (2017), for example, investigated how rural English schools with overwhelmingly white populations dealt with incidents of racist bullying in relation to race equality issues. Their study showed how the selected schools acknowledged, to some degree, the presence of racism, but also tended to describe such presence as being part of the cultural history rather than contemporary discourse. Moreover, since certain systems to address racism were in place, problems could be downplayed. In this process white identities were often privileged and protected, while those of non-white students, who possibly complained about the situation, were not (cf. Hallgren 2005). In a similar vein, Jenkins et al. (2015) interviewed young people (of ages 13–18) living in a rural community in British Columbia and showed how contextual factors, such as racism, segregation, social problems and poverty, had a negative impact on participants’ ability to create a sustainable life. Various forms of disconnections were created, leading to emotional distress and mental health problems. The authors argued that contextual factors become embodied, and they describe how context “gets under the skin” (Jenkins et al., 2015, 110).

Similar patterns were identified also in a study of a rural Swedish school. Building on focus group interviews and individual interviews with 14 and 15-year-old students, Odenbring and Johansson, 2019 could identify high levels of everyday racism. A central zone of conflict concerned clothing and dress codes. The study showed how some boys harassed and humiliated Muslim girls. The boys also argued that they should be allowed to wear caps in schools, if the Muslim girls were allowed to wear a veil. Racist sentiments were thus sugar-coated in terms of arguments of fairness. To understand these tensions and conflicts in the school, it is necessary, according to the authors, to understand and read what happens in school in the context of a rural society in decline, increased immigration, and growing social tensions in the local society (see also Dovemark 2013; Lewis 2003).

In addition to the overwhelming evidence of the presence of racism in the rural schools in Sweden and elsewhere, studies have also showed that there is an interconnectedness between a high presence of racism and sexism (Öhren 2009; Rawlings 2019). In research, the relationship between gender and racism/extremism has largely come to be a narrative about young men in subcultural settings constructing dominant and ethnocentric masculinities, expressing dismissive and misogynistic comments to women/girls and racist attitudes towards immigrants (see Fangen 1998; Perho 2000; Kimmel 2007; Shela-Shayotiz, 2011). Though schools and communities often respond denouncing racism and sexism, it has been shown to be notoriously difficult, however, to define what constitutes a pedagogical intervention in schools against such expressions. Some interventions might be part of a systematic effort, whereas other interventions are spontaneous efforts to solve critical situations as they arise in a classroom or in a school corridor. Moreover, teachers themselves may not necessarily perceive and define their efforts in terms of interventions, but rather as on-going pedagogical challenges and didactical choices, perhaps mobilised against some student to protect others when a situation occurs. Furthermore, according to Bhopal and Myers (2009), teachers often tend to feel ill-equipped to deal with issues of racism, which is why such issues are sometimes outsourced or dealt with on a particular day during the school year, rather than being an integrated part of everyday teaching and teachers’ interaction with students (see also Halse 2017).

3. **Theoretical framework**

Racism is often placed on a scale stretching from xenophobic attitudes and acts to institutional and everyday racism. In this study we invoke Philomena Essed’s (1991, 2001) concept of everyday racism. This concept avoids the distinction between micro and macro dimensions of
According to Essed everyday racism is:

justice and a belief in fair and equal treatment of minority groups (Essed 1991; Eliasoph 1999; Walton et al., 2013). As a conceptual tool, everyday racism is understood as heterogeneous in its manifestations, but also as something that is structured into uniformity. This means that everyday racism cannot be reduced to incidents or to separate events. On the contrary, it connotes a more systematic approach to people’s everyday behaviour. This form of low-intensity, micro-aggressive, lurking racism is integrated into the very mechanisms, routines and fabric of everyday life in schools and the communities in which they are situated (Lewis 2003; Gaudio and Bialostok, 2005; Bourbain and Verhaeghe 2021). In contemporary Swedish society everyday racism is not understood as being primarily based on the idea of biological and genetic differences, but rather on how cultural attributes, such as clothes, language, style, taste and other identity markers, can be used to sort and categorise people into different “races”. According to Essed everyday racism is:

… the integration of racism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioural, see below) that activate underlying power relationships. This process must be seen as a continuum through which the integration of racism into everyday practices becomes part of the expected, of the unquestionable, and of what is seen as normal by the dominant group. When racist notions and actions infiltrate everyday life and become part of the reproduction of the system, the system reproduces everyday racism (Essed 1991, 50).

Using this definition of everyday racism, we will focus on practices and narratives that may seem mundane or trivial, or as single events rather than a series of similar occurrences. These narratives, however, will be redefined as instances of everyday racism. Also, targets of racism will often conceal their anger because they feel powerless and find it difficult to see how the daily harassment might be challenged. Using Essed’s theory, we will also be able to come closer to an understanding of complex patterns of acts, when the same person can utter prejudiced platitudes while simultaneously expressing a commitment to racial justice and a belief in fair and equal treatment of minority groups (Essed 2001). In this sense, it is possible to talk about a racism without racists (cf. Taylor, Degnen & Blamire, 2022).

In addition, we will also employ Ahmed’s (2012) thoughts on institutional life and institutional racism. When things become institutionalised, they recede. If, for example everyday racism is institutionalised, it becomes a routine part of ordinary life; it becomes part of the “buzzing” background noise at an institution. According to Ahmed, psychologising racism and identifying racism with individuals facilitate the reproduction of racism in institutions. She writes:

So eliminating the racist individual would preserve the racism of the institution in part by creating an illusion that we are eliminating racism. Institutions can “keep their racism” by eliminating those whom they identify as racists. (Ahmed 2012, 44)

Consequently, we will focus on patterns and mechanisms in the everyday life of students, and try to discern, identify, and analyse how everyday and institutional racism is maintained, reproduced, mainstreamed and possibly challenged in their school and in the rural area in which they live (cf. Taylor, Degnen, Blamire, 2022). Looking closer at the fabric of everyday life at the schools, we will be able to get closer to how often unintentional forms of racism are played out. In order not to disrupt our presentation of data and to give voice to participants, the theoretical framework presented here will be employed implicitly rather than explicitly.

4. Method and research design

In the article we have applied a qualitative approach to the research. The empirical material was gathered in the spring 2021 and consists of interviews with Swedish upper secondary school students. Using qualitative measures, then, we have endeavoured to grasp the particularity and life situation of these students and how they understand and think about the presence of racism and sexism in their school and surrounding community. The sampling process was constructed as two steps. In an initial step, two geographical areas, with long-standing experience of continuously high levels of National Socialism and racist social practices, were selected (Poohl, 2018). These geographical areas were identified using a model for analysing National Socialist social practices and presence over time developed by the Segerstedt Institute (a national resource centre that aims to contribute to the development of knowledge on how to prevent violent ideologies, violent structures, and racist organisations) in co-operation with Expo (a Swedish anti-racist foundation). In a subsequent step, contacts with upper secondary schools in two identified rural areas was established. The principals of the schools were contacted. Once their permission had been obtained, and with the help of teachers, students were contacted. We refer to the schools using the pseudonyms Broadfield and Shortfield.

A total of 25 students of ages 14–16 participated in the study (11 at Broadfield, 14 at Shortfield; 12 boys, and 13 girls). The aim was to recruit students in the ninth grade, as they are of legal age. However, we also asked their parents of permission to interview their children. In principle, we selected one school class at each school. The majority of the students were born in Sweden, and white. Five of the students (two from Broadfield, and three from Shortfield) had immigrant backgrounds, and had also arrived the last five years to the local communities. In the selected schools approximately 25 percent of the students had immigrant background. All students were interviewed individually, and the interviews lasted in between 30 and 45 min. Additionally, we conducted two focus group interviews, one at each school, with 5 students participating in each group, and a mixture of girls and boys. The students were drawn from the original sample of students. The focus group interviews were carried out during school hours, and lasted around 45 min. By selecting two areas and schools, and pairing individual interviews with interview data from focus groups, the intention was to triangulate data to confirm findings, expose contradictions, or reveal unexplored themes. However, the intention is not to compare the two schools. In many ways, they are quite similar, and we will therefore use the data material as one case.

The structure of the days on which interviews were held was similar for both schools. They began with a teacher guiding the participating students to a nearby site to which we had been given access. Here a joint breakfast had been prepared. During breakfast we also took up lunch orders for later. After breakfast, researchers and students gathered in a circle to introduce themselves to one another. Following this, different team-building exercises were conducted – for example, playing charades, where one student/researcher tried to illustrate a hobby or interest without using words. The group also joined hands in a circle and tried to move different objects (sunglasses, a cap, etc.) without letting go. After this, the students could then play video games or pool or just hang out, while the researchers conducted individual interviews in secluded rooms at the same facility.

The purpose of the joint breakfast and initial group exercises was to try to create a relaxed atmosphere in the group and trusting relationships in preparation for the upcoming interviews, which according to Giddens (1986) is a good starting point when aiming to unravel aspects of our everyday life that might otherwise be perceived as trivial, or when there are sensitive topics to be discussed (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In the interviews we asked the students to describe Shortfield/Broadfield, and their school. We also asked questions about their experiences of and thoughts about racism, sexism, intolerance, immigration and more. When individual interviews had been conducted the group gathered again for a joint lunch and after that a few students were selected (after volunteering) for a focus group interview, whereas the others finished their day.
The research team consists of two male professors (62, and 45 years old), and a male research assistant (35 years old). All members of the research team are identified as white, and Swedish. The research assistant has a British father, and Swedish mother. Two of the members have a working-class background, and are also well acquainted with the local communities. The third member has a middle-class background. During the interviews, and also the analytical work, we have used our different backgrounds, and subject positions to discuss and validate different interpretations. We have also tried to avoid letting our stereotypical images of the local communities influence our interpretations of the young students’ narratives. It is of course difficult to determine how our research positionality (gender, age and whiteness) have impacted on data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, guided by ethical care for participants, relationship building and transparency (as described above) we aimed to build not only trust but also draw valid conclusions from our data.

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The relational and processual approach to data analysis then followed four steps (Walby 2013). Firstly, departing from the initial thematisation, we identified the key plot and narratives of the study, as they were being described by the participants. We acquainted ourselves with our participants’ narratives and reactions to the plot – in this case, their different understandings of the geographical area in which the schools were situated, as well as how expressions of racism and sexism manifested in schools. Secondly, we focused more closely on how different students narrated their stories and constructed their subjectivities in relation to the plot, that is, how they positioned themselves in relation to the presence of racist social practices at Broadfield and Shortfield, respectively. This meant digging into the data to look at how the “I” is expressed. Thirdly, we searched for multiple voices within a story, trying to broaden the analysis to the relational matrix in which the self is integrated. Finally, we analysed how the narration of the self linked up with broader cultural discourses and structural conditions that shape and possibly limit the participant’s ability to take action. This also included how the narration of the self linked up with broader discourses, such as on class, age, sexuality, and ethnicity.

To ensure confidentiality, all names and places mentioned in the text have been anonymised. Formal ethical approval to carry out the study was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Ref. No. 2020-06769).

5. Results

5.1. Mosquitos, mill town mentality and neo-Nazis

When asked to describe the area or county in which they lived, most of the students in Shortfield and Broadfield, initially painted a rather positive image. They used words and phrases such as “close-knit”, “social” and “familiar”, however when talking more with the students, a darker, and more negative image of the local community is also emerging.

Melissa, for example, lived a bit outside of Shortfield with her parents and two siblings. Every day she went to Shortfield, to the school or to meet friends:

Yes, Shortfield it is a place with a population of … I do not really know how many people there are, but it’s an old mill town, with an old factory. There is a school, and some pre-schools. There have been some stores in the centre, but most of them are gone now. There is a grocery store, and a hairdresser.

Melissa here captured some aspects of the architectural structure and economy of Shortfield (cf. Grosz 1995). Emerging is a narrative of a small-scale rural locale. It is a place where one finds closed stores and some empty houses here and there. It is obvious that Shortfield has lost some of its former glory, due to the closing down of factories and other establishments, but it is still thought of in terms of familiarity. Another student, Julia, talked about Broadfield in a similar manner. Julia lived in a house and liked to play soccer and hang around with her friends when not in school. She said the following.

Well, behind our house there are these apartments and above that there are the woods and then it’s our house. And there is this street and neighbours in all directions. And then it’s like several streets in a row, you know. Then you can go up here and you get to the school. It is a close-knit area. I like it here. (…) the best thing about Broadfield, I guess, is the sense of community. Everybody knows one another …. I mean, yeah, but I would probably say they do. You feel safe, I think, knowing people, when you’re going to the grocery store, which is nearby. It’s almost guaranteed that you’ll recognise someone when you’re there. I think that’s nice.

Most of the students tended to describe Broadfield and Shortfield in rather positive ways. Some were engaged in different sport activities, which they enjoyed, and most also spent a lot of time at home with their families and friends. These are places where “everyone knows one another”; and where there is a sense of closeness; a social community. The phrase “typical country mill towns” is mentioned frequently (as by Melissa, above) in the narratives. Though there is no joint or universal meaning attached to this phrase, some clues are given. Influenced by their histories as mill towns, there were references to a typical mentality, and signs of social deprivation. This is something that most of the students described. They talked about their community in terms of close-ness, but also in terms of places where one could see signs of drug abuse, accidentally encounter someone drunk in the grocery store, and see signs of lack of proper care, of both children and houses. Some students also explained that this was not a place where you strolled around in the evenings when it was dark outside. In the interviews a darker image of Shortfield and Broadfield gradually emerged.

Mohammad lived with his parents and four siblings. He and his family came to Sweden some eight years prior and they soon settled in Shortfield. He talked about the community as double-edged – both “warm” and “cold”. When talking about the “cold” side of the community he said that some people were not very keen on immigrants. He explained that he did not feel directly threatened and that he had a strategy to avoid “getting into trouble”. He said:

I never go out in the evenings, when its dark outside. You have to think – you have to use your head – because obviously there are these people that think that there are too many immigrants in Sweden. But, yeah, what am I supposed to do about that? I guess they have a right to their opinion. So, I … you have too … adapt, like adapt to this and adapt how you behave. For example, if it’s dark outside, you must … like, if there are not that many people outside on the streets, then you must stay at home. If it’s daytime and bright outside, and other people are out, well then you can go out. And it’s like harder for them (the racists) then – if they were about to do something, if something were to happen to me sort of – if other people are outside too and can see. But I don’t think it will happen to me. But it happens to others.

Mohammad, too, described Shortfield as a nice place and a friendly community. As he continued talking about it, however, it became clear that he had developed his own strategy as regards how to deal with the racism he had observed at school and in Shortfield. What Mohammad’s narrative exemplifies is how a lurking racism was constantly present in his daily life, which affected how he navigated in the community and society. He restricted actions in his daily routines by an unnoticed, normalised presence of racism, with his immigration background background placing him in the “wrong” category, from the perspective of the dominant group (Essed 1991). In this sense, Mohammad navigated and adapted to the ever-present racism, reproduced through numerous small acts, and the attitudes and sentiments of the inhabitants in Shortfield. This implicit racism almost became invisible, as long as the individual did not challenge the order.

Some of the students, who also had Doodlebug tractors, were often
described by the other students as a specific gang — hanging around, drinking, and sometimes expressing strong views on immigrants. Though it is not clear if this is the group Mohammad specifically referred to in his narrative, it is reasonable to assume that this group had the kind of attitude toward immigrants that he mentioned, as there was a con-federate flag mounted on some of the tractors. Some of the students were also well aware of the historical presence of racist skinheads, and the neo-Nazi movement in the areas. In Shortfield, there was also a club-house, where the local neo-Nazis gathered and met up for festivities and political meetings. Jennifer, who lived with her mother, presented a vivid and colourful description of Shortfield:

Shortfield? There are lots of mosquitos in the summer. I also think about the neo-Nazis a lot. This is what I think of when I think about Shortfield. I don’t know.

Interviewer: Mosquitos and neo-Nazis?

Jennifer: Yes, that is what comes to mind when I think about Shortfield.

Interviewer: So, in what way do you think about neo-Nazis?

Jennifer: Well, I do not know, but there was this famous National Socialist here in Shortfield. This was the origin of the Swedish neo-Nazi movement. Also, there is still a neo-Nazi clubhouse here in Shortfield, close to the gas station.

Interviewer: How do you know about this?

Jennifer: Because my dad is a neo-Nazi.

Jennifer obviously found herself in a precarious situation. She did not agree with her father’s views and currently had no contact with him. Still, during her upbringing she had come to associate the local rural context, in which she was brought up, with racism and the presence of neo-Nazism. Though the closeness to neo-Nazism in her family life set Jennifer apart from many of the other students, they were nonetheless united in the expected and largely normalised view of racism that surrounded both Broadfield and Shortfield. The local rural context was described as a mill town, a close-knit community, in which racism and intolerance were present and always lurking. In a way, the students’ descriptions of their geographical area implied that they understood it as soaked in a racist history and practices (cf. Blombäck 2017). In the next section we will zoom in further on this presence and consider how it might play out in the students’ school environment.

5.2. A toxic school environment

As Broadfield and Shortfield were initially described as small social communities, the students’ schools were generally portrayed as welcoming, generally positive places where the teachers cared about the students. There are, however, layers to this “plot” (Walby 2013). Whereas the initial responses were positive, during the interviews other, more negative, descriptions also took form, though not always expressed, showing that the students had become accustomed to a certain level of sexist and racist slurs and expressions. This could be described as a constant buzzing sound — where words such as “whore”, “pussy”, and “nigger”, were uttered freely in the corridors or other places in the school (cf. Bourabain and Verhaeghe 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this usually occurred when teachers were not present.

Sixten from Shortfield described this:

Interviewer: Are there any problems with sexism at the school?

Sixten: No, I don’t think so.

Interviewer: That people call each other “whore” or even “pussy”, and such things?

Sixten: Yes, very often. Mostly when they’re pissed.

Interviewer: To whom do they say this?

Sixten: Mostly after the game, when they get angry. However, it is not directed at any specific person!

This quotation aptly illustrates the mechanisms and the social dynamics involved when there is harassment in a school. Firstly, Sixten did not affirm the presence of sexism, misogyny, or other forms of intolerance, but when asked more explicitly about this, he says that it occurred “very often”. Secondly, he apparently tried to excuse students who used these slurs and offensive words, and — telling — said it was not directed towards any specific person, he said. Consequently, no one could be offended. Sexism is here seen as something innocent, as a joke, not as bullying or harassment (cf. Bishop Mills and Carwile, 2009; Ohrn 2009; Rawlings 2019). In this sense, sexism and racism becomes normalised, mainstreamed, and a part of the institutional structure. Another student at Broadfield, Maya, who herself had an immigrant background, commented as follows.

Yeah, we have different classes, like A and B classes, so yeah, you just have to hope for a good class. In some classes they might be racist and everything. Maybe they show up in a good class anyway, but it’s scary for those who come here. You don’t know what to expect and it can be tough, and some kids get bullied by the racists and stuff like that. But other than that, it’s safe. There are teachers you can go to and special resource teachers.

What this and the preceding excerpts illustrate is that questions concerning sexism, racism and harassment were largely taken for granted as a part of the ordinary school environment, and that this was to be expected. Accordingly, some students (e.g., girls and those of an immigrant background) were to some extent expected not only to be exposed to, but also to endure some level of racism, sexism and intolerance. According to the students this was not accepted by their teachers, but at the same time teachers and other school staff were considered unable to deal with all the everyday occurrences of racist slurs. It was institutionalised (Ahmed 2012). Racist and sexist utterances were also often addressed in a somewhat apologetic manner. Another student, Emil, talked about some students with immigrant backgrounds and how they were treated. In his narrative he talked about different incidents and what he thought about the school’s responses:

Yeah, the Arab, he’s experienced a lot of stuff here at Broadfield school. One time he got into a fight with another student when they were playing football. Then the other student took one of his boots, went up to the woods nearby and pissed in the boot. That’s a gross example. And then in sixth grade we heard — and that was probably not so smart of us — but we heard someone had said the n-word to the Somalian … Then whatever the higher powers, or whatever you want to call them, did about this, I don’t know. But yeah, I don’t know what to say. The school is good to speak up about it — they react. But it’s hard to protect students from everything.

In his narrative Emil moved between a position in which he (when younger) saw himself as part of the group in which racist utterances sometimes were expressed, and a position of distancing himself from the more explicit examples when everyday racism turned into physical abuse. A line was seemingly being drawn here. Mirroring Myers and Bhopal (2017) we can also see that Emil thought his school did recognise the presence of racism while understanding there are limits as to what could be done about it (see also Zimmerman and Astor 2021). This was also touched upon in other narratives. Below, Ville talked about the occurrences of “swear words” and how they could be used in a “respectful way”.

I don’t really know if we have more swear words for immigrants, because I don’t think about it that much. It’s like, many people here just say “fuck”, and so on. I can’t think of any swear word other than “nigger”. I really think many people here are really good at showing
so much respect that when they see a “nigger” or immigrant, they do not call them “niggers”. I think they should be praised for that.

Ville lived with his parents and two siblings. He enjoyed fishing and computer games. Like many other participants, he talked about racist utterances mainly in terms of swear words. Ville was, however, quite open about the fact that he disliked immigrants. He also said he and his friends quite frequently used language other people would regard as racist, but as he expressed it: “We don’t mean to cause harm”. Consequently, racist slurs, comments and sexist opinions were thus excused, in a way, and partly camouflaged as ordinary cursing and part of typical youth behaviour.

What this section has illustrated is how racism, sexism and intolerance and harassment generally were normalised among the students and institutionalised as part of their daily life (Essed, 2001; Ahmed, 2012). A certain level of harassment – in the form of name-calling, and verbal abuse – had thus become a part of the “normal”. It was addressed as such, and if the abuse as not “too physical” or explicit, it was largely taken for granted, sometimes not even recognised unless pointed out specifically. Given such an environment, it is perhaps not surprising that explicit expressions of neo-Nazism sometimes also occurred. This will be discussed in the next section.

5.3. The return of the repressed

When talking about how some students use sexist and racist slurs, the participants often tried to downplay the significance of the prevalence of everyday sexism and racism in school. Clearly, by making racism into something different – talking about swear words and jokes – the students contributed to the reproduction of institutional racism (Ahmed, 2012). In fact, this apologetic approach towards racism could be understood as support for the potential for taking it “one step further”, using symbols and acts from the neo-Nazi movement. It may be appropriate here to talk about the return of the repressed – symbols and expressions from the neo-Nazi movement. The local histories of Broadfield and Shortfield, as part of the reproduction of the neo-Nazi movement, were echoed in repeated incidents in the schools and nearby surroundings. As Loke explained:

I mean, at certain places in Shortfield – close to the school, for example – if you took time to stroll around the school and the surrounding neighbourhood, you would find, say, three or four swastikas scrawled on walls and so on. Graffiti on walls or in the swimming hall. That’s what I’ve noticed. Then we also have the boys doing Hitler salutes. I haven’t noticed that so much, though.

Similar narratives are found also among the students at Broadfield. Below, in a focus group interview, Emil and Theo talked about this. Their discussion grew as a response to a question about what they thought living in Broadfield was like for immigrants.

Theo: I think it could be hard.

Emil: Yeah, I think so too.

Theo: Like, if you sit on the loft, at our school, and you just look up from your computer, like just have a quick look on the wall. There are swastikas, and several people, or someone, have written “hate the niggers”. Things like this … I mean, it can’t be easy.

Emil: Then maybe … if you’re an immigrant and you walk past this larger group by yourself, and you know that the group acts racist, then it could be hard, I imagine.

While the above narratives recognise that immigrant students’ situation could be challenging, generally a few swastikas, incidents of boys doing Hitler salutes or threats to immigrant students did not seem to attract too much attention. Another student, Irma, also mentioned that some students made Hitler salutes. She described a situation that occurred on Holocaust Day at the school.

Irma: Yes, and there’s always a gathering in the cafeteria at the school where people talk about the Holocaust, and there were some boys who did it in the cafeteria.

Interviewer: What did they do?

Irma: They did the Hitler salute.

Interviewer: They did?

Irma: Yes.

Interviewer: So, what happened?

Irma: Not much happened. I don’t think many people saw this.

When asked about these expressions and symbols and their connections to history, the students’ responses were quite vague. Also, some of the students referred to these things as jokes – something people did for fun or to provoke. In the following narrative however, Simon, described a situation he witnessed in which the connection between an incident and the history of Broadfield was anything but vague.

Simon: It has always been here, at the school. I mean from the beginning. Last year it was this student who got angry with a teacher, went to the front of the school, stood their shouting, did the Hitler salute and yelled. I had just been to Coop (a grocery store) and was on my way back to the school because I was on a break and had bought some candy, and I see this guy marching back and forth.

Interviewer: The student?

Simon: Yeah, and he turns around and shouts to the teacher “Sieg heil” and raises his hand. And then he goes into the school again (…)

Interviewer: But why did he do that?

Simon: I don’t know, but I know that there is neo-Nazism and racism at the school. It can be that Broadfield is an old Nazi nest and I’m thinking that this is part of why it lingers among the people to this day. Not all, but some, I would say, still think like this.

The students showed an awareness of their community’s past. In this sense, everyday racism and sexism was turned into something more potent and politicised. Although recruitment to neo-Nazi movements did not seem to be an ongoing scenario, there was clearly a potential for this kind of political radicalisation, as there were quite a few visible traces of the neo-Nazi movement in the schools and in the students’ everyday life. In fact, these traces, in the form of symbols and signs, were to a certain degree normalised as potential occurrences, where some classes were labelled as more problematic than others and some students were known to be more explicitly racist than others. The return of the repressed – the communities past as a hotbed for neo-Nazi recruitment, and activism – was often treated as something harmless by both teachers and students. In this sense the dangerous potential of a reawakening of the political past, fuelled by the institutional racism at the schools, played out.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Everyday racism and sexism are more or less chronic problems in many schools. The “problem” exists in both rural and urban schools. It is also an international problem: we find similar results from school studies in various countries. However, it seems that the relationship between everyday racism and the social and cultural context is somewhat underresearched. In this article, we have zoomed in on two rural schools, in communities with a long history of neo-Nazi presence and mobilisation. Our findings suggest that there is a need to further investigate how old structures and local sentiments continue to contribute to the reproduction of racism and sexism in certain communities and geographical areas.

The students’ understanding of their local community was
ambivalent and multi-layered. Narratives of idyllic nature and friendly locals were mixed with experiences of racism and the actual presence of neo-Nazi subcultures in the neighbourhood. Mantras such as “If you leave people alone, they will leave you alone” and “Mind your own business, and everything will be fine” seemed to permeate the culture of these rural communities. Upon looking more closely at the schools and at the interaction between students in the school environment, similar patterns were seen to emerge. When asked about the school climate – the existence of harassment and bullying – the students often tended to say that everything was fine at the school. However, when we dug a bit deeper into these narratives (and plot), a more complex picture soon emerges. Racist slurs as well as misogynistic and sexist vocabulary were saturating daily life at the schools. This had become so institutionalised/normalised, that the students were seemingly accustomed to a certain level of harassment. Also, students with an immigrant background had adjusted to the ever presence of racism in daily life. By keeping silent, staying at home at certain times, these students avoided “trouble”. At the same time, Mohammad, for example, was aware of the mechanisms of everyday racism.

So, what takes this presence of everyday racism and sexism to another level is the more or less frequent occurrence of neo-Nazi symbols and acts. This could be analysed in terms of “the return of the repressed”, that is, as a reminder and sign of the local communities’ past history of neo-Nazi activism. Everyday racism becomes something more significant, and something else in this local context. The institutional racism of the school – the inability to change the agenda and to counteract everyday racism – provides a potential hotbed of radicalisation and neo-Nazi recruitment. Further, some of the students tended to talk about neo-Nazi expressions and symbols as if they were quite innocent – mere jokes – making it even more urgent to develop pedagogical and social strategies to turn this development around and create a less toxic space for learning and living.

There are, of course, limitations to this study, and the aim is not to generalize the results empirically, but to suggest further research in this area. There is extensive research on racism and sexism in both rural and urban schools. In relation to this, this study confirms these sociocultural patterns. However, what sticks out in this particular study, is the relation between a local history of neo-Nazi presence, and the more or less frequent occurrence of neo-Nazi symbols at the two schools. In this sense, current study illustrates the connections between local communities’ historical past, and tendencies to reproduce certain sentiments, and prejudices over time, and the need for further research on this issue.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Vetenskapsrådet: [grant no 2020-03111].

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