



DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED IT,  
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# “IT’S HARD TO EXPLAIN... THEY WERE JUST STRANGE”

Applying intergroup contact theory to the case of  
Swedish primary school children

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## **Abstract**

The study investigates the in-and out-group attitudes of Swedish seven-year-old ethnic majority- and minority children participating in a bridge-building project. Drawing on previous research on prejudice reduction, the study aims to examine the applicability of Allport's intergroup contact theory on the specific age-group, in the Swedish context. The study is conducted as an ethnography, with participatory observations and group conversations used to investigate the children's attitudes and opinions. The results reveal that after an extended period of intergroup contact the attitudes of the majority- and minority children differ profoundly, with the majority children expressing much more negative feelings than their minority peers. Based on the results, it is concluded that the children's different previous experiences and status pose a major obstacle to intergroup contact taking place on equal terms. Moreover, negative contact, intergroup friendships and gender are found to impact the results of the children's interaction. The results of the study have implications both for the conduction of future similar projects, and for integration strategies in Sweden more broadly.

## **Keywords**

Communication, intergroup contact, prejudice reduction, children, ethnic minorities, Sweden, ethnography

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# Introduction

In the past decades, Sweden has been marked by an increasing political and medial focus on segregation and problems related to ethnic and cultural differences (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018; Mjelde & Hovden, 2019). Despite integration efforts, the country's level of segregation has steadily increased (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018; Ericsson, 2018; Mjelde & Hovden, 2019). The most debated issue regards *förorter* - neighborhoods in the outskirts of the metropolitan areas, with a high percentage of the population having foreign background (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018; Ericsson, 2018). From the very beginning, the story of *förorter* has been centered around their "differentness" compared to the majority society (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018; Ericsson, 2018). The stigma surrounding these neighborhoods has resulted in societal, economic and educational inequalities, and residents of *förorter* often feeling subjected to prejudice and discrimination (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018).

In 1954, Allport published "the Nature of Prejudice". Written in the aftermath of the Second World War and in the early days of the civil rights movement in the United States, the aim of the book was to find ways to prevent prejudice-based discrimination and hostility. The main argument is that direct contact between different groups leads to reduced prejudice. While Allport's book is close to 70 years old, the same ideas are still used as a foundation in various integration projects across the world (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Much research has concluded on the efficacy of intergroup contact for reducing segregation and prejudice (McLaren, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Stephan, 1999). The most prominent results are among children, as stereotypes and racial attitudes are difficult to challenge in adulthood, but much easier to target in young children (Aboud, 1988; Crystal et al., 2008; Stangor & Schaller, 2000).

This study follows a bridge-building project aimed at reducing prejudice between children from one of Sweden's *förorter* and an adjoining, very demographically different neighborhood. The main purpose of this study is to examine the applicability of Allport's theory on this age group, in this specific, Swedish context. While intergroup contact as a concept has been thoroughly applied and analyzed in a variety of cases, it has not been applied to these specific groups, in this context, and rarely on real-life examples where the participants do not choose to participate themselves (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Thus, the project poses a unique opportunity to investigate both the in-and out-group attitudes of these specific groups, and whether or not Allport's theory is applicable on projects like this.

To test the theory's validity, one must first examine whether or not the children perceive each other as members of different groups and how this is communicated. Moreover, in order for the study to have societal relevance, the factors underlying the results of their interactions have to be analyzed. Hence, based on the overarching aim, three research questions are derived:

## Research questions

**RQ 1:** *How do Swedish majority-and minority primary school children from two different neighborhoods perceive and communicate their identities in relation to each other?*

**RQ 2:** *How does direct contact between the two groups affect their attitudes towards each other?*

**RQ 3:** *What factors influence the results of their interactions?*

The study has both social and theoretical implications. For one, if proven successful, bridge-building projects like the one examined might be one way to target both segregation and prejudices. Hence, potentially pointing to strengths, limitations and underlying issues, the results of the study could be used to improve future, similar projects. Moreover, by examining the two groups' perceptions of and attitudes towards each other and the factors underlying these, the results might also be used to improve integration efforts in Sweden more broadly.

# Background

## In-and out-groups, prejudice and intergroup contact

Before moving on to the theoretical foundation of the study, some core concepts need to be defined. This study is based on the assumption that both identities and in- and out-groups are socially defined, and constructed and reconstructed in interactions with others (Jenkins, 2006). While in-groups are the groups that we consider ourselves members of, out-groups are the groups that we do not consider different and do not identify with (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Hence, at the core of this study is the assumption that our sense of identity and our group memberships are intrinsically linked. It is through our group memberships that we define both our sense of self and our relationships to others. While our in-groups help us define what we *are*, our out-groups define what we *are not* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

An individual's various in-and outgroups can be based around many things – from gender and ethnicity to occupation and place of residence. That our different in- and out-groups result in prejudice is not necessarily negative. Allport (1954) claims that people have a natural need to categorize each other, and simply do not have the time to find out what is actually true about each person, making prejudice the given solution. The problem with prejudice is its tendency to result in discrimination.

The most significant effect of in- and out-groups is that we tend to perceive the behavior of in-group members more positively than that of out-group members - what Pettigrew (1979) calls the 'ultimate attribution error'. This in turn has a tendency to result in prejudiced beliefs, where negative behaviors of out-group members are seen as characteristic of the entire group (Pettigrew, 1998). These types of beliefs are demonstrably often the cause of discriminatory and hostile behaviors (Aboud, 1988, 1993; Allport, 1954; McLaren, 2003; Nesdale & Flessner, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Hence, since the early 1900's researchers have sought to uncover the factors underlying prejudice, and find ways to target these attitudes (Allport, 1954; Brophy, 1946; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

While everybody can be subjected to prejudice, minorities are at greater risk than majority groups due to majority members' societal position as the norm (Bigler, Brown & Markell, 2001; Yazdi, Barner & Heyman, 2020). Minorities to a larger degree than majorities are also aware that they are perceived as members of a distinct group, as majority members rarely have to reflect on their group membership or on their group's privileged status (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Hence, earlier research has commonly argued that diverse societies show higher levels of prejudice (Quillian, 1995, 1996; Taylor, 1998; Putnam, 2007). Perhaps most prominent, Putnam (2007) claims that residents of ethnically diverse neighborhoods display lower levels of trust, community cooperation and have fewer out-group friends. He argues that societies with large minority groups tend to be characterized by feelings of threat and competition between different majority- and minority groups. While there is indeed evidence that prejudice increases with higher levels of minority members in a society, in those cases, the influence of positive intergroup contact has not been taken into account (Christ et al., 2014; McLaren 2000).

Allport's theory about intergroup contact is one of the most influential contributions to the study of prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). While Allport was not the first to propose the hypothesis of contact between groups (see e.g. Williams 1947) he was the one who specified the context and conditions required (McLaren, 2003). At the heart of Allport's theory is the argument that it is lack of communication between groups that results in prejudice and hostility. Hence, he proposes direct contact between members from different groups in order to reduce prejudice. Moreover, he argues that four conditions have to be met in order for the contact to have positive outcome:

- 1) EQUAL STATUS. Allport places most importance on equal status *within* the contact situation. It is important that both groups perceive themselves as equals.
- 2) COMMON GOALS. The goals must require a common, active effort.
- 3) INTERGROUP COOPERATION. The common goal must be reached through cooperation, without intergroup competition.
- 4) SUPPORT BY AUTHORITIES, LAW OR CUSTOM. Authorities must establish norms of acceptance (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998).

Since the publication of Allport's theory, a number of scholars have questioned both the theory at large, and the conditions more specifically - labeling them unsophisticated and too simplistic (Amir, 1976; Putnam, 2007; Stephan 1987). For example, while Stephan (1987) recognize the potential of intergroup contact to reduce prejudice, he argues that the complexity of intergroup contact - including the setting, the studied groups, and their individuals - all have to be taken into account in order for any conclusions to be made. However, since the 1950's the theory has been tested and confirmed about 500 times (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Moreover, intergroup contact has been associated with reduced prejudice on a macro- as well as micro-level, with people also being influenced by the positive intergroup attitudes of others (Christ et al., 2014; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Importantly, research show that in situations where the conditions are not met, where participants feel threatened or the contact is involuntary and negative, prejudice and hostility tend to be enhanced instead (Amir, 1976; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Throughout the years, Allport's ideas have been refined by a number of scholars (Ashmore 1970; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In 1998 Pettigrew added friendship as a factor, naming it "an essential, not merely facilitating, condition for positive intergroup contact" (1998, p. 76). Especially important for this study is Ashmore's extension of Allport's definition of prejudice. Allport's original definition of prejudice is "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group" (1954, p. 7-9). Ashmore (1970) widens this definition, defining prejudice as "a negative attitude toward a socially defined group and toward any person perceived to be a member of that group" (1970, p. 253). This definition highlights the fact that group memberships are socially defined, and that it is people's *perceptions* of in-and out-groups that matters. Thus, based on Ashmore's definition, this study rests on the assumption that all *perceived by others* as members of a group may be subjected to prejudice based on that group membership.

## The Swedish situation: segregation, prejudice and *förorter*

As both identities and in-and outgroups are socially defined, they are also dependent on history, power relations and the context in which they take place (Lewis & Moye, 2003). Thus, in order to study prejudices against certain groups, one must have an understanding of the social and political situation in which the prejudice occur (Christ et al, 2014). This section therefore provides an overview of the contemporary European and Swedish context in which this study is conducted.

In 2003, McLaren (2003) applied Allport's theory to the situation of minorities in Europe. McLaren argues that few issues have had greater impact on Europe than immigration. He even concludes that the social relation problems between ethnic minorities and native populations can be compared to those between the black and white populations of the United States during most of the nation's history. Since McLaren's study was published, Europe has seen a wave of electoral success for right-wing parties focused on the preservation of national identities and the need for a separation of different ethnic groups (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2011; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). Several studies, primarily from the field of media and communication, have looked into how this has affected the societal discourse on both migrants and ethnic minorities in Europe. Their findings suggest a return to a hierarchical-based ethno-pluralism where ethnic minorities are portrayed as threatening to

European values (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2011; Kaya & Karakoç, 2012; Mjelde & Hovden, 2019;).

Sweden is a prominent example of this development. Until the 1960s, Sweden was one of the most homogenous countries in Europe. Today, Sweden is one of the most diverse European societies, with over 20 % of its inhabitants having a foreign background (Krzyżanowski, 2018). Despite integration efforts, levels of segregation have steadily increased since the 90's. These societal trends have put immigration high up on the Swedish public agenda (Mjelde & Hovden, 2019). Thus, while previously commonly labeled "the world's most equal country", the past years have been marked by an increasing focus on segregation, migration politics and discussions centered around "Swedish values" (Ericson, 2018; Krzyżanowski 2018). At the heart of the debate are often the Swedish *förorter* - neighborhoods situated at the outskirts of the metropolitan areas, with high levels of low-income households, often with a foreign background (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018). The media's portrayal of these neighborhoods tends to focus on cultural clashes, drugs, gang rivalry and poor school performances (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018; Ericsson, 2018).

The story of *förorter* goes back to the government's effort to establish affordable housing - the so-called million program - in the 1960's. Since then, these areas have had a larger proportion of low-income households, with higher levels of unemployment and crime than the rest of society (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018). Due to this, media's portrayal of these neighborhoods has always been centered around their "differentness". Originally, this was explained in terms of socioeconomic inequalities (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018). However, with waves of labor force immigration moving to these neighborhoods between the 1970's and 90's, the political and media story changed to one about "immigrants". Problems previously explained in terms of socioeconomic inequality were instead seen as a result of cultural differences and immigration (Dahlstedt & Frempong, 2018).

It is in this broader societal context that this study takes place. While minority and majority groups have been identified by previous studies as some of the most prominent in- and out-groups in the contemporary, Swedish society, this study seeks to investigate their relevance among primary school children.

## Children and prejudice

Much research has shown that in-group biases and stereotypes are easier challenged in children than in adults (Aboud, 1988; Crystal et al., 2008; Stangor & Schaller, 2000). Moreover, the stereotypes and in-group biases established and consolidated during childhood tend to result in prejudices and discrimination in adulthood. On the other hand, having cross-ethnic friendships during childhood is associated with positive intergroup attitudes later in life (Stangor & Schaller, 2000; Ellison & Powers, 1994; Nesdale, 1999). Thus, the most efficient way to target prejudice is to help children form intergroup friendships.

Research has shown that by seven years of age, most children display some level of out-group prejudice (Nesdale, 1999; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin & Griffiths, 2005; Nesdale & Pelyhe, 2009). However, whether or not prejudices emerge depends on several factors, most importantly how strongly the children identify with their in-group, if out-group prejudice is a norm among other members of the group, and if members of the in-group in some way feel threatened by the out-group (Nesdale, 1999; Nesdale et al., 2010). Moreover, the attitudes of the in-group as a whole have substantial influence on the attitudes of the individual group member. Children who do not conform to group norms and expectations are often less liked, and sometimes even excluded from their in-group (Nesdale & Brown, 2004; Nesdale, Durkin, Maass & Griffiths 2004; Nesdale et al., 2007).

In this context, the most powerful norms are what Castelli, De Amicis and Sherman (2007) call injunctive norms – norms that "promise social sanctions by other group members when acting against them" (Feddes, Noack & Rutland, 2009, p. 380). In the case of intergroup relations, engaging with out-group members may be seen as deviant behavior by other in-group members, potentially resulting in

exclusion from the group. Thus, individuals are kept from forming these kinds of friendships. At the same time, other studies find that children as young as six years old are aware that it is not socially accepted to show ethnic and racial prejudice, and are concerned not to show their out-group biases (Rutland, Cameron, Milne & McGeorge, 2005; Thijs, 2017).

Another crucial aspect of children's out-group attitudes is group status. Just like adults, children who are part of dominant cultural groups more often display in-group biases and out-group prejudice than children from groups with lower social status (Bigler, Brown and Markell, 2001; Nesdale 1999; Nesdale et al., 2004; Nesdale & Flessler, 2001; Nesdale & Pelyhe, 2009). While in-group favoring is natural to most groups, research on both gender- and racial attitudes find that children from groups with lower status do not always favor their own group. If given the opportunity, individuals from low-status groups will sometimes even leave their own group to join one with higher status (Bigler, Brown and Markell, 2001; Nesdale & Flessler, 2001; Nesdale et al., 2004).

In a recent study on Iranian children, Yazdi, Barner and Heyman (2020) identify group status as the single most important factor for the children's evaluations of other groups - more so than both cultural and ethnic similarity and intergroup relations. These results are consistent with other similar studies, and indicate that even young children are aware of societal discourses. While there can be many explanations, the authors specifically point to the fact that not only are high-status groups more often depicted in media, they are also the ones commonly associated with high-status positions in society and thus commonly role models for children to look up to (Bigler, Brown & Markell, 2001; Yazdi, Barner & Heyman, 2020).

While most studies on the issue have focused on the role of teachers, school curriculums and families, several recent ethnographic studies have examined the way children make sense of diversity through interactions with each other. In their study of a day care facility, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) find that children's identities and racial categories are constructed through interactions with other children. And in a more recent study on preschool children, Park (2011) concludes that while children lack the vocabulary of grown-ups, they use their own metaphors and discourses to make sense of their differences. Uniting these studies is the claim that children are not "empty vessels" to be filled up by grown-ups, but formulate and reproduce their own discourses in interactions with each other. Drawing on these findings, this study is focused on the attitudes and perceptions of the participating children, rather than those of teachers or leaders.

## Method

Combining previous literature on children and prejudice with theories on in- and outgroups and intergroup contact, the aim of this study is threefold: 1) to gain a better understanding of if and how Swedish ethnic minority- and majority children from different neighborhoods perceive each other as members of different groups and how this is communicated; 2) how intergroup contact affect their attitudes towards each other; and 3) what factors influence the results of their interactions. As an ethnography, this study has the advantage of being able to follow both minority- and majority group children over an extended period of time, thus being able to identify changes in attitudes and behaviors in both groups.

### Settings and participants

The sample of this study consist of two groups from a bridge-building project, here called The Project. The Project is an initiative within a larger youth organization focused on organizing outdoor youth activities. Each group in turn consists of two first-grade classes, with children around the age of seven, from two different schools: Sjölyckeskolan and Majblomsskolan. Sjölyckeskolan is located in a *förort*, and Majblomsskolan in an adjoining neighborhood. The percentage of students with foreign background is around 90 percent at Sjölyckeskolan, and 20 percent at Majblomsskolan (Skolverket, 2020). The groups were supposed to meet during a total of seven sessions spread out across the school year, starting in September and ending in early June. However, due to the Corona pandemic of 2020, The Project was cancelled after four sessions. The sessions took place during school days, each lasting between 1,5 to 4 hours. My last visit was conducted at the schools, where I talked to the children about their experience of The Project in groups of two to five.

Based on the findings and definitions of Ashmore (1970) and McLaren (2003) this study uses the broad distinction between “majority children” (Swedish heritage) and “ethnic minority children” (foreign heritage). While these definitions are in themselves both problematic and complex, it is these two definitions that are most commonly used in the societal discourse, and demonstrably often the foundation for prejudice and discrimination (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002; Thijs, 2017). Based on these categories, whether the children were first, second or third generation immigrants, were not taken into account. When describing the children's’ ethnicities, I drew on the studies of Park (2011) and Blum (2002) and their way of categorizing people by first looking at physical appearance and then checking with the children. In several cases the kids themselves told me about their heritage before I asked. All children spoke Swedish fluently, but a majority of the children from Sjölyckeskolan had another first language. Two teachers, both from Sjölyckeskolan, had other-than-Swedish ethnic background, the other eight had Swedish background. All participating teachers were female. The gender distribution of the children is outlined in the tables below.

At the very first session, the children were randomly assigned a smaller, mixed group of five to six members - half from Sjölyckeskolan, half from Majblomsskolan. The groups were then given a stuffed animal as a group mascot - their so-called “forest friend”. Often, activities and assignments were carried out in these group formations. Hence, in accordance with Allport's theory, the contact between the two groups was institutionalized (taking place during school days, with teachers and instructors present); with equal status between the groups (in the sense that they met on “neutral ground” with an outsider organization); with common goals among the children (there were often assignments to be solved); and with intergroup cooperation (the assigned tasks forced the children cooperate within their groups). The tables below show the divisions of the small mixed groups.

<b>Group 1</b>		<b>Group 2</b>	
<i>Sjölyckeskolan</i>	<i>Majblomsskolan</i>	<i>Sjölyckeskolan</i>	<i>Majblomsskolan</i>
<b>MOOSE</b>		<b>MOOSE</b>	
Muna	Melker	Leo	Sven
Emma	Sofia	Amal	Tindra
Farhad	Johanna		Ofelia
<b>BEAR</b>		<b>BEAR</b>	
Ervin	Tilda	Abdi	Lukas
Lea	Noah	John	Ester
Lee	Isabelle	Maja	Edvard
<b>OWL</b>		<b>OWL</b>	
Sara	Vera	Amal	Olivia
Sharon	Karin	Abdulla	Conrad
Mayid	Frida	Fatma	Leia
Amo			
<b>DEER</b>		<b>DEER</b>	
Zinah	Nellie	Ali	Pixie
Mustafa	Hugo	Muntaz	Edvin
Haydar	Linn	Clara	Svea
	My		
<b>WOLF</b>		<b>WOLF</b>	
Merja	Lisa	Abdifatah	Arvid
Isak	Jonna	Noah	Louise
Parashtu	Kerstin	Suleyman	William
<b>FOX</b>		<b>FOX</b>	
Imaan	Bella	Maya	Thea
Bahiya	Elsa	Nimo	Elias
Yousef	Tove	Roberto	Pontus
<b>HEDGEHOG</b>		<b>RABBIT</b>	
Bina	Alice	Huda	Sakarias
Milo	Aileen	Ari	Liv
Moshe	David		Hanna
<b>BADGER</b>		<b>LYNX</b>	
Abdirahman	Elis	Mohamed	Rut
Destiny	Edith	Selma	Gabriella
Nadra	Emil		Linn
			Philip

	Boys	Girls	Total	Teachers
<b>Sjölyckeskolan 1</b>	12	9	21	3
<b>Majblomsskolan 1</b>	10	15	25	2

	Boys	Girls	Total	Teachers
<b>Sjölyckeskolan 2</b>	12	13	25	3
<b>Majblomsskolan 2</b>	6	19	25	2

The sessions took place both at the two schools and at sites nearby. The table below provides brief descriptions of the locations of the sessions and their activities.

<p><b>Session 1: The Field</b></p>	<p>The Field lies a ten minute walk from Majblomsskolan, and a few bus stops away from Sjölyckeskolan. It is a popular area for rock climbers and hikers, surrounded by cliffs and forest.</p> <p>During the session, the children were divided into their small, mixed groups. First, they were handed their group mascot and told to come up with a name for it. They were then given various tasks to perform as a group.</p>
<p><b>Session 2: Majblomsskolan</b></p>	<p>Majblomsskolan is located in the middle of a residential area consisting mostly of one-family houses. The school yard consists of asphalt, with several playgrounds spread out around the buildings. Behind the school yard lies what the children and teachers refer to as their school forest - a small forested area on a hillside.</p> <p>The children from Majblomsskolan were first told to give their group members from Sjölyckeskolan a tour around the school. All groups then walked to school forest where they were given new group assignments.</p>
<p><b>Session 3: Sjölyckeskolan</b></p>	<p>The school is located in a <i>förort</i>, twenty minutes outside the city center and two kilometers away from Majblomsskolan. The two neighborhoods are separated by a highway. A bike path connects the two schools. The school lies next to a tram station, surrounded by million-program buildings. The school yard is asphalted, with a large soccer field and several playgrounds. The Project's activities take place in a nearby forest -</p>

	<p>a small grove with planted pine, located next to a gravel heap.</p> <p>As in the previous session, the children from Sjölyckeskolan were first giving their group members from Majblomsskolan a school tour, before walking together to the forest. There, the assignment was to decorate Christmas trees with objects found in nature. The assignment was carried out in the small, mixed groups.</p>
<p><b>Session 4: The Climbing Gym</b></p>	<p>The gym lies in the city center, in an industrial area close to the motorway. The gym consists of two areas, one with high walls and top-ropes, and “the cave” with boulder walls and blue soft mats on the floor.</p> <p>The children were not divided into their small, mixed groups but two larger, randomly selected groups with children from both classes. During the session the children got to try bouldering and rope-climbing. There were no group assignments. Besides Iris and the teachers, several climbing instructors were present.</p>

## Data collection strategy and procedures

At the beginning of this study, The Project had been running for three years and consisted of several groups, with children age seven to ten. The analyzed groups were selected in order to be able follow the children from their first interaction. At the first session I was introduced by The Project’s leader Iris as “Matilda, who will be with us when we meet”. The children never questioned my presence, but had different ideas about what my role was. If the children asked me what I was doing there, I tried to be transparent and told them that I was there to examine The Project and their feelings towards it.

During the sessions I participated in spontaneous conversations, but most often was able to listen in on the conversations the children were having with each other and observing the way they interacted from a distance. I tried to participate as much as possible in the activities, writing down what I found to be of importance when I got the chance. I brought a small notebook in which I scabbled down my thoughts as they came - mostly in the form of codes and abbreviations. Once the session was over, I used my notes to write down a more coherent, chronological text. In accordance with many other ethnographic studies, fieldnotes were not sampled according to pre-set criteria, but intuitive and based on what seemed to be relevant at the time (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011). However, I looked specifically for instances related to the research questions and above all, paid close attention to group dynamics and the language used by the participants to signal identity positions and to differentiate between each other (Gee, 1999; Park, 2011; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

A few weeks after the last observation, I visited the schools to talk the children about their feelings towards the project. Drawing on O’Reilly’s (2011) suggestions for ethnographic conversations, the conversations were conducted in smaller groups of two to five children, selected by the teachers in order for the children to be with classmates they felt comfortable with. Due to the situation with

the Corona pandemic, only around 50 % of the children at Majblomsskolan were present and able to participate in the conversations. At Sjölyckeskolan, the percentage was slightly higher. The children were told beforehand that we would talk about The Project and their feelings towards it, and that it was voluntary to participate. Only two children chose not to participate. I started out by asking how the children felt about The Project in general and followed up with supplementary questions based on their answers. Each conversation lasted between ten and fifteen minutes.

I initially planned to audio record the conversations. However, the first conversation group acted uncomfortable and reluctant when being recorded, hence notes were taken instead. When taking notes, I strived to be as detailed as possible, and sometimes asked the children to wait while I finished writing. If the children asked what I was writing I told them and sometimes let them look at my notes. Between each group I had a break where I went over and refined my notes. While it would have been interesting to investigate the attitudes of the teachers, the aim of this study was to investigate the children’s attitudes specifically. Hence, only children were talked to.

## Data analysis and presentation

The data was coded manually. While there can be advantages to using coding software, the scope of the study made manual coding more suitable (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; O’Reilly, 2012). I started the coding process by reading through all notes in chronologic order, line by line, searching for general patterns. I had no pre-determined codes, but allowed these to be formed by what was found to be of significance. The patterns that I found were then grouped together and labeled (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). Certain incidents were given more than one label. Having gone through the material several times, the most prominent themes were turned into headlines. The labels and the headlines they were sorted under are outlined in the table below.

Label	Headline
Communicating identities	Communicating identities
Invisible rules	Participation on unequal terms
Unneutral settings	
Language	
Teachers’ influence	
Previous experiences	
Names	The importance of names
Ethnicity, origin & appearance	Status differences, in-group norms and out-group attitudes
Status markers	
Not accepted to make out-group friends	
Establishment of intergroup friendships	Other factors: negative contact, gender and intergroup friendships
Gender	
New in-groups	
Negative interactions	
Allport’s four conditions	

In the presentation of the results, the category of Allport’s four conditions was incorporated into the other sections and not included as a separate headline. As is the case with ethnographies in general, not all that emerged from the data could fit into the written results (O’Reilly, 2012). Hence, the data is presented thematically, with quotes and extracts used to answer the research questions and to illustrate the wider issue at hand. In the presentation of the results, my own notes and comments are italicized.

## Limitations and ethical considerations

While an ethnography has many advantages (see for example, Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; O'Reilly, 2012), it is important to be aware of the impact the researcher might have on the participants and thus on the results of the study. A common criticism of ethnographies is that the results are reduced to the experiences of the researcher. However, the same is true for other methods - in the words of Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011): "surveys reduce the lived experiences of people to numbers; video and audio recordings only catch a slice of the ongoing event; transcriptions reduce the multimodality of the conversation, thus selecting particular dimensions and contents" (2011, p. 13). As with all other methods the importance lies in being transparent.

It is important to note that my own background, interests and previous experiences both as a researcher and personally, have implications on my interpretations of the research participants and their interactions. I have Swedish-born parents and are part of the ethnic majority population. Moreover, I am born in the city where the study was conducted and had my own perceptions and previous experiences of the two neighborhoods even before the observations began. I have previously worked in the neighborhood where Sjölyckeskolan is located, at a different school, teaching Swedish as a second language and are still voluntarily engaged in the neighborhood. Since I was actively participating during the sessions, my presence inevitably affected the participants in different ways. Thus, throughout the study I sought to continually critically reflect upon my own presence, and the factors that might contribute to my interpretations of particular events and happenings (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011; O'Reilly, 2012).

Conducting research on minors is always especially sensitive. Before the observations began a few steps were taken in order to avoid ethical pitfalls. The study was presented to the teachers before the start of the semester, and to the parents at parental meetings a few weeks before the first session took place. The parents were told to email me if they had any questions or wanted to know more about the study. Before the group conversations were conducted, information was once again sent out to the parents asking for consent. No-one declined. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the names of both the participants and the schools have been changed, and information that could be used to identify the participants left out.

## Analysis and findings

The very first session takes place on the last day of September. The first group from Sjölyckeskolan have gathered at The Field, waiting for the class from Majblomsskolan to arrive. After a few minutes we hear the other kids approaching and as they emerge behind the corner, both classes wave excitedly at each other. They gather in a circle around Iris, the leader of The Project, as she proclaims that she is neither a teacher, nor belonging to either school, but all of theirs “common forest friend”. During the rest of the session, and in the sessions to come, the kids are most often divided into smaller, mixed groups and work together to perform different tasks.

Hence, at first The Project appears to align with Allport’s four conditions. The children are asked to cooperate towards common goals. There is support by authorities in the form of teachers, leaders and instructors, and the children at first glance appear to have the same status. However, from the very first session it is apparent that none of Allport’s conditions are entirely lived up to. While the children do at times cooperate towards common goals, this only happens occasionally and is not a built-in feature of The Project. Rather than establishing norms of acceptance, the teachers, on several occasions, instead highlight the children’s differences. It also soon becomes apparent that the children’s different experiences and backgrounds make their participation in The Project unequal. Of importance for all of these findings is that the majority children also appear to perceive the minority children as part of a distinct out-group. All of these issues are further outlined below.

## Communicating identities

In accordance with previous research on children’s awareness of race, ethnicity and prejudice (Park, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), the majority group children from the very start, repeatedly communicate that they view the minority group children as “different”. Throughout The Project they recurrently refer to their appearance, skin color, way of talking and behavior as examples of their differentness. They also frequently make comments about the entire group and group traits rather than individuals.

One of the most striking examples of the children communicating their differences unfolds during several different interactions between Lukas and Abdi – both members of the Bear Group. The first noticed interaction takes place during the second session, when the children from Sjölyckeskolan visit Majblomsskolan. All groups are gathered in the “school forest” behind the school yard.

*Lukas (Swedish) reads off Abdi’s (Somali background) name tag.*

Lukas: Abdi, cool name! I just have a normal name.

Abdi (*reading of Lukas’s name tag*): Lukas... I, u, k, a, it rhymes, you could make it into a rap (*starts rapping*)!

During the following session, Lukas and Abdi stick together. They are walking towards the forest where the group activities will take place, when suddenly Lukas, unrelated to the conversation they were just having, starts rapping.

Lukas: my name is Lukas, I come from Sweden, I eat meatballs and potatoes!

Taken together, these interactions between Abdi and Lukas illustrate how the children communicate and adjust to their conceptions of each other. Here, it seems like Lukas is adjusting to what he perceives as Abdi’s way of communicating - rapping. He then relates it to how he either believes Abdi perceives him, or how he perceives himself, by stating that he is Swedish, and explaining what Swedish people do. Thus, more than highlighting how their communication is affected by their perception of each other, the interaction indicates that Lukas views Abdi as something other than Swedish, and that

he - at least in relation to Abdi - finds Swedishness to be part of his own identity. The interactions also support the findings of Park (2011), that children are not “empty vessels” to be filled up by grown-ups, but use their own metaphors and discourses to make sense of their differences.

However, while the majority children pay a lot of attention to the differentness of the other group, they also seem to have a sense that the issue of ethnicity and origin is taboo and not something that one should be talking about. During a group conversation with a group from Majblomsskolan, Linn is trying to describe the boys in her group from Sjölyckeskolan.

Linn: He had glasses... and one came from another county... well, almost everyone came from another country...

Olivia, another girl in the group interrupts.

Olivia: Or we don't know if they are from another country, but we think so.

More than suggesting that Olivia believes it is not socially accepted to talk about origin, ethnicity and race, her response indicates that she thinks that “being from another country” is not something to be proud of - but rather something negative - hence, she has to clarify that they are not sure if that is actually the case.

## Participation on unequal terms

Throughout The Project it becomes apparent that the minority children are not able to participate on equal terms as the majority children. The indicators of the children's unequal opportunities are sometimes subtle, but over time and seen in the light of the children's responses during the conversations, clearly of importance. Uniting all examples is that they highlight the often-unnoticed advantages the children from Majblomsskolan have from being majorities and therefore the societal norm, both in regard to names, appearance and previous experiences (Yazdi, Barner and Heyman, 2020).

A couple of instances highlight the disadvantages of not having Swedish as a first language. The first example takes place during the second session. One of the tasks of the small, mixed groups is to find things in nature that start with the different letters of the alphabet. While the rest of their group is looking for things starting with another letter, two girls from Majblomsskolan and a girl from Sjölyckeskolan are debating what they should find that starts with the letter B. Eventually, the two girls from Majblomsskolan decide that they should look for blueberry plants. It is obvious that the girl from Sjölyckeskolan does not know what the word blueberry plants means, but is reluctant to admit so. She instead half-heartedly walks around, examining the different plants on the ground, until the two other girls happily proclaim that they have found it.

A similar event takes place at the climbing gym. The children are seated on the floor in a half circle. The climbing instructor, John, goes through the rules and most important things to know when top-rope climbing. After a while he asks the group why they think it is called top-rope. Several children from both schools raise their hands. Destiny from Sjölyckeskolan gets the word and excitedly shouts “because it's dangerous!”. John looks skeptical, like he was not expecting that answer and replies that that is not why. Another girl from Sjölyckeskolan shouts “because it is long!” This time, John moves on without even providing an answer, seemingly not knowing what to say. To me, knowing what a top-rope is, it is apparent that John is searching for an answer connecting the name to the fact that the rope is fastened at the top. However, while it might seem obvious to John that the word is made up by two different words, related to its meaning, the girls from Sjölyckeskolan - not having Swedish as their first language, and never having climbed before - do not seem to pick up the two parts of the word, making any answer possible.

While these examples are subtle, they are related to the larger issue of teachers and leaders unknowingly highlighting the differences between the two groups. Even before the session starts, it becomes apparent that a majority of the children from Majblomsskolan are used to climbing. As teachers and leaders do not take this into account, the children from Majblomsskolan are made into the knowledgeable ones, and the “differentness” of the children from Sjölyckeskolan is reinforced.

More than reinforcing the feeling of the two groups being different from each other, these inequalities also seem to affect the children’s interactions. When going through the rules of climbing, John only mentions top-rope-climbing. However, once his introduction is finished, the children are split into two groups - one group top-rope-climbing, the other bouldering in the adjoining room. Emil from Majblomsskolan has brought his own harness to the gym and is acting very confident. He starts in the boulder area and is climbing together with his friend Elis when the following extract takes place.

*Elis: (shouting at Farhad from Sjölyckeskolan standing below, on his way to jump down from the boulder wall): Watch out!*

*Farhad: Oh my god!*

*Farhad says it in a very dramatic way, almost as a joke, putting his hands up to his face at the same time. It seems like he sees the situation as a chance to interact with Elis. Elis lands right next to him.*

*Elis: I said WATCH OUT, so you watch out! Otherwise you got yourselves to blame! You always have to look up when climbing!*

*The tone of his voice is clearly annoyed, and the way he utters the words has an underlying feeling of “don’t they know anything?”. Elis and Emil walk off, clearly irritated, almost contemptuous.*

The extract above highlights how the children’s different previous experiences sometimes result in negative interactions. To someone who has climbed before, it is obvious that you do not walk below someone who is up on the wall. However, for a seven-year-old, entering the climbing gym for the first time, it is not as obvious.

When the second group meet the next day, another instructor, Emelie, goes through the rules. She explains, very pedagogically, how both top-rope climbing and bouldering works. Even before Emelie starts talking, Iris is also quick to explain that it is very important not to walk below someone that is climbing. In my notes I write that this reduction of differences in knowledge and experiences might be a contributing factor to the fact that there is less conflicts in the second group.

## The importance of names

Throughout The Project, it becomes apparent that one of the most striking features of the children’s different advantages lies in their names. Research specifically on the importance of names have found that not only are names crucial for our sense of self and identity, but also closely connected to cultural beliefs and values (Kim & Lee, 2011). Alford (1988) even states that “a named child has, in a sense, a social identity. To know a child’s name, in a sense, is to know who that child is” (p. 29). In light of these statements, the following extracts provides important insights into the children’s different status positions and the establishment of their group identities.

During their very first session, the children are divided into their smaller, mixed groups, handed their stuffed animals and told to come up with a suiting name for it. There is a teacher present in each group. Iris emphasizes the importance of agreeing on a name that is accepted by all members of the group. In several groups, the children from Sjölyckeskolan suggest traditional Swedish names like Sven, Bosse and Bertil. On numerous occasions, the present teacher comments that those are “suiting” or “good” names. The names suggested by the kids from Sjölyckeskolan are often non-traditional Swedish- or made-up names; one girl suggest “Tränia” and “Lövia” (in English, “Woodnia” and “Leafia” - probably an effort to find “forest like” names). None of the names suggested by the children from

Sjölyckeskolan get labeled “good” or “suited” by the teachers. Either the teacher says nothing at all, or, in the case of “Tränia” and “Lövia” asks if those are “even real names”. Just like the events at the climbing gym, examples like this illustrate how the normativity of the children from Majblomsskolan is confirmed and reinforced by the grown-ups, while the differentness of the minority children is strengthened.

It is unclear how the children from Sjölyckeskolan feel in situations like the ones described above. When I later ask them about their small, mixed groups, the initial response from several children is to happily proclaim the names of their animals. However, two different occasions suggest that these kind of events do not go unnoticed by the children at Sjölyckeskolan either. The first example takes place during the first session as the children are divided into their groups. A teacher from Majblomsskolan is asking the kids from Sjölyckeskolan for their names. After Abdirahman has introduced himself, she fails to pronounce his name six times - his classmates correcting her each time; at first laughing, but as she continues to struggle, seemingly getting frustrated. Eventually the teacher gives up; shrugs it off, laughs and concludes that “that was the hardest name today”. While it is not the teacher’s intention, her response again, portrays the minority children as deviant from the norm. This is done in front of the majority children, whose status as the norm once again is confirmed.

The second example is subtle, but powerful. During the third session, Lukas and Abdi, the boys from “the Bear Group”, are walking together. A teacher from Majblomsskolan asks them what their group bear is called. Lukas immediately, proudly declares that the bear’s name is Linus, lifting the bear up in air. Abdi, quietly, almost to himself, with a defiant tone, whispers “but I call him Mohamed”. The exchange indicates that the reinforcements of the majority children’s normativity do not go unnoticed by the minority children.

The most obvious examples of the importance of names come from the group conversations. When I ask the children from Sjölyckeskolan about their small, mixed group, they immediately start by naming their group members from Majblomsskolan. Most of them remember the names of everybody. At Majblomsskolan, the opposite happens. Almost nobody can remember the names of their group members from Sjölyckeskolan, instead referring to the way they looked or behaved. Lo, from Majblomsskolan, struggles to remember the names of the members of her group, but can only remember one.

Lo: Well, I remember that there was one boy named Isak, cause that’s pretty easy to remember you know.

In accordance with the findings of Yazdi, Barner and Heyman (2020) the examples above illustrate the advantages majority group members have from being the societal norm. Just like their first language and their previous experiences, their names are what is “normative”, while the minority children’s names in comparison get labeled as “different”.

## Status differences, in-group norms and out-group attitudes

While the examples above illustrate mostly negative interactions, throughout The Project I also that members of some of the smaller, mixed groups seemingly quickly become friends and remain together during the sessions. From the very first session, The Moose Group stands out from the rest of the groups. While most other groups split up when they do not have any more tasks to perform or when it is time for a break, the members of the Moose Group stick together. During my first observation of the group, I note the following:

*Melker from Majblomsskolan has a strong will. He proposes that the Moose should be named Captain Underwear. Everybody laughs. The rest of the group, both the kids from Majblomsskolan and Sjölyckeskolan come with other name suggestions. Melker repeatedly*

turns them down. Someone suggests “the Moose King” (Älgkungen) but another child mishears and believes he said “The Fire King” (Eldkungen). Everybody laughs again.

Melker: Let’s name him the Fire King!.

The entire group: (*shouting in unity*) Fire King, Fire King, Fire King!

During the second session, at Majblomsskolan, the Moose Group is once again one of the mixed groups that stands out. The session begins in the classroom, with Iris going through the setup of the day. The first task is for the children from Majblomsskolan to give their other group members a tour of the school. As soon as the children are let out of the classroom, Melker shouts “Moose Group gathers at the swings!”. Members of the group from both schools repeat what Melker just said, and all members run towards the swings.

During the third session, I note that the dynamics have changed. The session takes place at Sjölyckeskolan and it is the minority children’s turn to show the other kids around. Emma and Farhad are seemingly the ones taking on the leader roles this time. To me, the atmosphere is still positive, and the group members continue to stay together. However, during the group conversation with the majority members of the Moose Group, their attitudes towards the minority children appear to be mostly negative. I talk to them as a group, and start out by asking how they feel about The Project as a whole.

Sofia: It wasn’t very fun. Because the boys were a little... annoying or what to say.

Johanna: If it had been another group it might have been more fun.

Sofia: Any other group!

Johanna: Our group was grumpy.

Sofia: They (*the minority members of their group*) wanted to decide everything! They always wanted to start, and they took over what we were supposed to do.

Melker: They were chasing me for example...

Sofia and Johanna: They took our animal!

Sofia: They decided VERY much. It was them who took it (the animal) first.

Melker himself is reluctant to go into detail about what happened when he was chased.

Matilda: What happened when you were chased?

Melker: I don’t know. I took it and everyone just started chasing me.

When I talk to the members of the Moose Group at Sjölyckeskolan they too immediately bring up the incident with Melker. However, they do not label the whole experience as negative, or place any emphasis on the majority group as a whole.

Emma: We had decided that we were going to take turns holding the animal, but then Melker took The Fire King and ran away and climbed up a tree.

Farhad: I fell in the mud, and then I started crying.

Matilda: How did that make you feel?

Farhad: Afterwards it was okay! We became friends with Melker again and things were all good.

Emma: Yes, I became friends with Melker again too.

The event where Melker got chased is also brought up by members from other small, mixed groups. In the conversation with Elis and Emil it is used as an example of the children from Sjölyckeskolan being “winy”. In the same sequence, they also refer to the boys’ skin color as something funny.

Elis: They were winy, like, all the guys.

Emil: Yes! They were all winy. One even started to cry! Melker had their animal and ran away with it, and then a boy fell in the mud and started crying!  
Elis: One guy, he was dark, well, they were all dark... (*laughs*)

On several other occasions both Elis and Emil laugh as they talk about the children from Sjölyckeskolan – often at their names and their appearance. During the third session, as we are walking towards the forest where the activities will take place, Elis and Emil are running away from their group. When a teacher calls on Elis to come back, he turns around, and with what is probably meant to sound like an exaggerative Arabic accent shouts back “my name is not Elis, it’s Ahmed!”. Both boys laugh. The issue of the other children’s names is brought up again during the group conversation.

Emil: There were also some... when we were building a tree house, that stood outside and screamed.  
Matilda: Screamed?  
Emil: Yes, like babies!  
Elis: (*nods*) Like babies... And there was one with a really long name, like grablablabla (*both laugh*).

The fact that appearances and names are continually brought up indicates that this is something the majority children finds to be of importance. As mentioned above, since the children from Majblomsskolan often do not remember the names of their group members, they instead refer to their appearance, supposed origin and way of talking. This aligns with previous research on the advantages of being the societal norm (Yazdi, Barner & Heyman, 2020). While some examples are subtle, like the example with Linn and Olivia saying that they “don’t know if they were from another county” but “think so”, others are much more straightforward. Hanna from Majblomsskolan is the one who is most outspoken about how “strange” she finds the minority children.

Hanna: Strange kids. Strange names. Dark. They looked different.

One of the most notable comments comes from Johanna, a member of “the Moose Group” from Majblomsskolan, as the group is discussing their group members from Sjölyckeskolan. They have just concluded that neither of them liked the group as a whole.

Johanna: Emma was different. It was like she could have gone to our school. But the boys were so annoying. They had a little different names, like Farhad or something.

While almost all of the minority children have either African, Middle-Eastern or Asian background, dark skin and accents, Emma is light-skinned, with light brown hair, and no clear accent. Seen in the light of other similar comments, the extract indicates that the children view the minority children as a separate group that they do not like, not because they go to a different school, but because they are minorities – looking and talking differently.

Previous research on prejudice among children find that, just like adults, children who are part of dominant cultural groups more often display in-group biases and out-group prejudice than children from groups with lower social status (Bigler, Brown and Markell, 2001; Nesdale 1999; Nesdale et al., 2004; Nesdale & Flessner, 2001; Nesdale & Pelyhe, 2009). Research also find that even very young children are aware of societal discourses, where the majority population most often is seen as the norm and the higher-status group (Bigler, Brown & Markell, 2001; Yazdi, Barner & Heyman, 2020). Hence, while the attitudes of the majority children might be examples of in-and out-group attitudes unrelated to the children’s positions as minority- and majority members, they align with previous research on status differences and prejudice. The conclusion that the majority children are aware of

their status position is strengthened by the several degrading remarks made by about the minority children's appearance, names and supposed origin.

Perhaps most notable are the children who originally appear to be positive about the minority members of their mixed groups. Throughout The Project I note that Lukas from Majblomsskolan seem very enthusiastic about both the activities and the children from Sjölyckeskolan. As mentioned, during several of the sessions, I notice him and Abdi walking together, holding hands and laughing. On the second session, when the children from Majblomsskolan are on their way to meet the children from Sjölyckeskolan, Lukas is walking at the front of the line asking Iris where "Abdi and the others" are. Initially, during the group conversation, it seems he has no issues remembering the names of the minority children in his group. When I ask him, he names everyone without hesitation. However, as the conversation proceeds, the other children express more and more negative attitudes towards the minority children. When the others state that they thought they had weird names Lukas agrees.

Lukas: They talked very strangely...

Matilda: How do you mean?

Lukas: It's hard to explain... They were just strange.

Seen in the light of previous research on in-and out-groups and peer pressure, Lukas's response is not surprising. Based on the examples above, it appears as if the majority group norms do not allow individual majority children to view the minority children positively. As mentioned, previous studies have found that group members generally try to conform to group norms in order to continue to be accepted by, and maintain the status of, the group (Nesdale et al., 2010). As intergroup friendships might be seen as deviant behavior by other in-group members, it becomes a risk for the individual to make out-group friends (Castelli, De Amicis & Sherman, 2007).

## Other factors: negative contact, gender and intergroup friendships

While the previous examples highlight the status differences of the two groups and their effects on the children's interactions and attitudes, there are also examples of the children developing positive intergroup attitudes. The most clear-cut example is the Hedgehog group. One of the group's members, Lo from Majblomsskolan, is very positive towards both The Project at large, and her group members from Sjölyckeskolan.

Lo: It was fun to get new friends, and not just hang out with my ordinary friends. When we met the first time I felt both a little nervous, and excited.

She also says that if she had met her group members from Sjölyckeskolan outside of The Project, she think that they would have played together there too.

Lo: Not just like outside, or at The Project, but if we had met at home or something too.

Just like the Moose Group, the Hedgehog Group stands out from the beginning. At the second session, when visiting Majblomsskolan, I note the following:

*The Hedgehog Group (half boys, half girls) have split into a "girl group" and a "boy group". The boys play on the playground and do not want to participate in the tour. Lo, from Majblomsskolan is walking together with the two girls from Sjölyckeskolan. Nodding towards the boys, rolling her eyes and shaking her head with discontent she says "they don't want to go anywhere..." The two girls from Sjölyckeskolan seem to agree – them too rolling their eyes as they walk away from the playground. There is a clear sense of unity among both the boys and the girls.*

In the coming sessions the Hedgehog Girls continue to stay together. Every time they see each other they wave excitedly, and when they say goodbye at the last session before the Christmas break, they group hug and talk about how much they will miss each other. All three girls are positive towards The Project and the out-group members of their mixed group during their group conversations.

The children from Majblomsskolan who establish intergroup friendships are the only ones expressing positive attitudes towards both The Project and the other children. Besides the Hedgehog Group, Thea is the one who is the most positive. She is in the same conversation group as Hanna – the girl who said that the others were “dark”, “strange”, and had “strange names”. During the conversation I note that Thea is acting subtly defensive about the minority members of her group, and the kids from Sjölyckeskolan in general. When Hanna says that the other children were strange, Thea, with an almost defiant tone, states that she made a friend. As the conversation proceeds, she continually returns to “her friend” and how much she liked her.

Thea: I had a friend. She was pretty. She was always happy. My friend was always happy.

Generally, girls from both schools are more positive towards The Project at large and the other children than the boys. In all conversations with the children from Sjölyckeskolan, the girls focus primarily on the friends that they have made. They also describe the activities of the sessions and seem proud about the tasks they have performed. Several of the boys from are more negative. Many of them do not talk much and reply to my questions by shrugging their shoulders. However, Ervin and Lee are in separate conversation groups, but provide similar replies.

Lee: They only played with each other. They didn't talk to me...

Ervin: It wasn't fun to be with the others. It didn't seem like they wanted to be with me.

Elis and Emil from Majblomsskolan are the most outspoken about their disapproval of The Project. The two boys tend to avoid the other children from the start. On several occasions during the sessions, they are explicitly told by their teachers to interact with the minority children. The most clear-cut example takes place on the walk to the forest during the third session. The children are walking in their small, mixed groups, two and two, holding hands. Emil and Elis are walking together. One of the teachers from Majblomsskolan is walking around, instructing the children to talk to their group members. She splits Elis and Emil up and pairs them up with Abdirahman and one of the girls from Sjölyckeskolan instead.

Teacher: That's the whole point of this! You are supposed to get to know each other. You can hang out every day with your ordinary friends, now you're supposed to get to know your new friends!

During the group conversation both Elis and Emil state that a reason that they do not like The Project is because they “have enough friends already” and “don't need any new ones”. Seen in the light of previous research, their forced interactions with the other children, might make them even more negative. As Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) and Amir (1976) have shown, involuntary intergroup contact tend to enhance prejudice out-group hostility instead. Moreover, several previous studies name friendship as one of the most important factors when it comes to both positive out-group attitudes and prejudice reduction (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2006; 2011). Hence, while the causality cannot be confirmed, taken together, the examples above indicate that both gender, the establishment of friendship and involuntary contact might influence the results of intergroup contact.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the applicability of Allport's intergroup contact theory on majority- and minority primary school children from two different neighborhoods in Sweden. Based on this overarching aim, the study sought to answer three questions: 1) how the children perceive and communicate their identities in relation to each other; 2) how direct contact between the two groups affects their attitudes towards each other; 3) what factors influence the results of their interactions.

**RQ 1:** *How do Swedish majority-and minority primary school children from two different neighborhoods perceive and communicate their identities in relation to each other?*

One of the most striking findings of the study is the majority children's descriptions of the minority children as "different". This is illustrated both in interactions between the children, and in the group conversations. The minority group did not as clearly define the majority children as members of a specific group.

This finding has both societal and academic implications, as it indicates that even very young children from the Swedish majority population perceive members of minority groups as "different". This is something that not only schools and youth organizations, but all sectors working with children, need to be aware of and handle. Moreover, as it is related both to societal inequalities and the societal discourse, it is a finding that future studies from several academic fields – from media studies and communication to pedagogy- can draw on and further investigate. Finally, it strengthens the argument that children make sense of their differences and construct their own discourses in interactions with each other.

**RQ 2:** *How does direct contact between the two groups affect their attitudes towards other?*

After six months of participating in The Project, the attitudes varied greatly between the majority - and the minority group. While the minority children mainly expressed positive feelings towards The Project at large and the majority children, the majority children were overwhelmingly negative towards both The Project and the minority group. While it cannot be concluded if their attitudes changed over the course of The Project, the result aligns with previous research on differences between minority-and majority groups. Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) argue that positive intergroup contact to a greater extent affect majority groups' attitudes, while minority groups' attitudes tend to remain mostly unchanged. Although it cannot be concluded, the results of this study indicate that *negative* intergroup contact also, to a larger extent affect the majority group than the minority group. While these results might be related to features and conditions of these specific groups, they align with previous research showing that minority groups have both lower status and are more often subjected to prejudice than majorities (Bigler, Brown & Markell, 2001; Yazdi, Barner & Heyman, 2020).

It is relevant to ask if it is even possible to reduce status differences between two groups with a long-standing history of inequality enough for equal participation to be possible. For one, the conditions might be interpreted differently by the two groups. Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) suggest that optimal conditions in a contact situation is more likely to result in positive out-group attitudes among majority members, since they do not notice the inequalities in their favor. The minority group on the other hand, might be less convinced that the situation is actually equal. However, the results of this study show that, on the contrary, the majority children reacted negatively when status positions were tilted even the slightest, while the minority children remained positive.

Whether or not it is possible to reduce status differences enough for them not to affect the contact situation is something for future research to look into. Moreover, in order to test the validity of these results, more research is needed on these specific groups. However, the results clearly indicate

that status differences need to be reduced in order for these type of projects to have the desired outcome. Taking all findings into account, one obvious finding is that Allport's four conditions were not lived up to. Hence, this study cannot conclude on the relationship between intergroup contact based on Allport's conditions and reduced levels of prejudice.

***RQ 3: What factors influence the results of their interactions?***

The results indicate that several factors impacted the results of the children's interactions. Adding to the conclusion that status differences affected the groups' different attitudes is the fact that the majority children who seemed positive towards the minority children appeared reluctant to say so in front of their in-group members. In accordance with previous research on the subject (Castelli, De Amicis & Sherman, 2007; Feddes et al., 2009; Nesdale & Brown, 2004) this finding indicates that group norms to a large degree affect the individual's out-group attitudes. Moreover, the results clearly illustrate the need for teachers and other grown-ups to be aware of the differences between the groups and find ways of adjusting to them. However, several examples indicate that authority figures, unknowingly, instead highlighted and reinforced these differences, hence strengthening the status position of the majority children.

The few majority children that did communicate positive attitudes towards the minority group all reported that they had made out-group friends. Hence, in accordance with the findings of Pettigrew (1998), this study confirms that the establishment of intergroup friendships has an effect on out-group attitudes at large. However, group status and group norms appear to be an obstacle for these type of friendships to take place. While this study aligns with previous research showing that intergroup friendships have a positive effect on children's out-group attitudes, the causality cannot be confirmed. It is possible that the children who made outgroup friends had more positive out-group attitudes to begin with.

During The Project, I noted that several of the small, mixed groups split up into smaller gender-based groups. These individuals in turn were the ones who reported that they had made out-group friends, and were more positive than their in-group peers towards The Project at large. In general, girls expressed more positive feelings than boys towards both the Project at large and the other children. Hence, while the scope of this study did not allow for further investigations into this, future research could examine both the possible effects of gender and the establishments of new in-and out-groups.

This study was conducted over the course of six months. It is possible that prolonged contact between the groups would have affected the participating children's attitudes in different ways and produced different results. While this study only examined the children's attitudes during and right after The Project, it is also possible that projects like this have an effect on the participating children's out-group attitudes later on in life. In order to confirm this, studies would have to follow the participating children over a longer period of time.

Due to the large proportion of ethnic minority children at Sjölyckeskolan, and ethnic majority children at Majblomsskolan, the classes at Sjölyckeskolan were labeled simply as minority groups, and those from Majblomsskolan as majority groups. However, there were exceptions to the rule at both schools. Due to the aim and scope of the study, the attitudes of those children were not separately examined. Another interesting subject for future research would be to look into those children's sense of in-group membership, and the effects of intergroup contact on these.

Finally, is important to note that the results of this study could be related to factors unique to the specific situation, groups and individuals of the study, and might not be applicable to other similar situations. However, the results provide a starting point for future research to be conducted in similar contexts. Moreover, they offer insights that could be used to improve future, similar projects. Finally, the results provide insights into the perceptions of in-and out-groups and attitudes related to these, among Swedish primary school children. These insights may be drawn on both by future research and societal actors in order to target segregation and prejudice in Sweden more broadly.

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