

## **An Autoethnographic Exploration of Judaism in a Rural Louisiana School**

Danielle M. Klein, PhD Candidate,  
Department of Education, Louisiana State University, Dklei16@lsu.edu

*Abstract.* This paper aims to explore tensions that Klein experienced as a Northern-born, White, Jewish educator in a rural, Louisiana high school that serves primarily Black, Christian students.

---

I lived the first 18 years of my life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in a suburb where people looked like me and where I was part of the religious majority of Jewish individuals, both practicing or secular. I consider myself of the secular group that respects traditions but doesn't adhere to the theology, so I still attended countless Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, celebrating the rite of passage into adulthood. Being Jewish in this enclave was commonplace and familiar, so my experience of being a White, female Jew in high school was similarly commonplace. Although I didn't participate in the religious practices, I embraced Judaism as a heritage with which I aligned, as did many of my friends and peers. In this area of Milwaukee, this was unquestioned and culturally supported.

My experiences of being a Jewish educator in a rural Louisiana high school that serves primarily Black, Christian students, however, have been quite different because my identity has provoked ethical deliberations and questions of pedagogical responsibility. This paper aims to explore some of the tensions that I experienced in this setting. It details my interactions through autoethnographic study and draws upon pedagogical literature to offer best practices that might ameliorate these tensions. It is an exploration of place and identity, and how place largely constructs identity itself.

## **The Move**

When I moved to Baton Rouge, the religious landscape shifted dramatically from my hometown, where there are more than twenty synagogues and countless delis and restaurants that offer Kosher and Jewish cuisine. In Baton Rouge, conversely, there are only two operating synagogues. While functioning synagogues are not necessarily indicative of the number of Jews in a particular locale, it is fair to assume that the number of Jewish places of worship correlates to the number of religiously practicing Jewish people, just as a lack of Jewish food options indicates a small population of culturally practicing Jews.

In Baton Rouge, Christianity is the dominant religion. When driving down I-10, one of the major highways, I am unsurprised to see billboards for churches, Bible studies, and attorney offices that use Christian Biblical quotes to draw clients. A church parking lot off the highway overflows so that congregation members must park along the grassy strip across the street. There is no shortage of Christian practitioners or places of worship here. In this same vein, there are boundless churches, yet no temples, in the small rural town where I work. It is in this small rural town, where the population is well under 1000, where my Jewish identity is most palpable.

## **The School**

Here, I have experienced being situated as “other” most potently. Although the school is public, the religious affiliation is clear. Before many staff meetings, an administrator has led the group in prayer to remind everyone that this is a praying community. On professional development days when community members and new hires alike introduce themselves, speakers share their gratefulness to God and Jesus Christ for the blessings they have received. One of the principals that I had worked under enlisted a pastor to attend each morning assembly to lead a prayer. A student of mine astutely asked if this was illegal, which certainly it is (McCarthy, 2009), but my multiple layers of identity abated my intercession in this praying practice.

In order to understand the nuances of my Jewishness in contrast to this rural, Christian school, it is fully necessary to examine the multiple intersecting power dynamics. First and foremost, I am a white, Northern teacher in a traditional public school, one that adheres to state curriculum and encourages the teacher-as-head-of-classroom mentality. Research realizes that this, in and of itself, is an influential position. Delpit (2006) notes that “issues of power are enacted in classrooms,” including “the power of teachers over students” (p. 24). As a teacher, opinions, inclinations, and overall biases are received as coming from a place of authority. For this reason, my thoughts are heavily weighted and must be presented with caution. Furthermore, if I intend to discuss religion and my positionality as a religious minority, I must tread lightly, contrary to the practices of my school. A teacher wields immense power, and broaching a controversial topic, or a topic that simply questions ordinary practices of a specific place, must be done delicately.

In addition, I am a White educator amongst a student body comprised nearly completely of Black learners. As noted by Gramsci, “educators need to understand how the dominant culture structures ideology and produces social practices in schools, for the purpose of shattering the mystification of the existing power relationships and the social arrangements that sustain them” (as cited in Darder, 1991, p. 33). The school where I teach is situated in a high-poverty area, and I must be aware of the power that I yield as a member of the racial hegemony and a representative of the power structure of the United States. Scholars have noticed the proclivity many White educators have when entering into a school with primarily Black learners in low socioeconomic situations to “fix problems” and “reroute learning,” which have rings of deficit-model thinking, as “teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural differences” (Delpit, p. 172).

In such a position of power, it is necessary to self-regulate and analyze the information I present, constantly scanning for rings of White savior tendency and colonizer mentality. Emdin (2016) observes a tendency to “exoticize the schools ... and downplay the assets and strengths of the communities [teachers] are seeking to improve” (p. 7). He likens many of these tendencies coming from privileged cultures as “Carlisle-type practices” (p. 7), practices that forcefully suppress the agency, culture, and tradition of a school and

community with intention of White acculturation. He also finds a penchant for White teachers to inhabit “the idea that one individual or school can give students ‘a life,’” an idea that “emanates from a problematic savior complex that results in making students, their varied experiences, their emotions, and the good in their communities invisible” (p. 20). That being said, it is imperative to be cognizant that I am a White outsider in a community where I was not raised and to which I commute. I must approach the students and school from a place of collaboration, not remediation. In general, as a White, Jewish teacher in a primarily Black school and Christian community, I need to “lean back” and ensure that I give adequate space for my students’ voices and choices, as “the notion of student voice is fundamental to the struggle for democracy and equality in the classroom, particularly as it relates to the development of voice in students of color (Darder, p. 66).

Current research overwhelmingly says I need to restrict normalizing pedagogical practices and offer grounds to embrace and explore “the unique instances of self-expression through which students affirm their own class, culture racial, and gender identities” (Darder, p. 66). This, of course, would include their Christianity and the role that the church has played in African American identity, civil rights, and social justice. Ironically, what has functioned as historically liberatory for my students, that is, the power of Christianity, now functions as a form of oppression for me. At the same time, research admonishes teachers from suppressing student culture, as “to provide school for everyone’s children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it” (Delpit, p. 28). Consequently, I am placed in an ethically ambiguous situation, attempting to reconcile my power as a White educator with my marginalized position as a Jew.

Thus, as teacher and, particularly, a White teacher, I have a lot of power in the classroom. My words are impactful, as is my criticism. If I were a devout Christian, I’m not sure how my attitude to the ubiquitous Christianity in my school would manifest itself. As a secular Jew, however, the morning prayers and sporadic Christian references are unsettling. They did not make me feel unsafe, but simply ill-at-ease. I felt uncomfortable bowing my head in prayer but conflicted about what a lack of participation would relay. In a miniscule act

of defiance, I occasionally would simply leave the auditorium. I didn't participate, but in cowardice masked my noncompliance as teacher-duty by feigning that I was on the lookout for some minor misbehavior from the student body. In prayer before a teacher workshop, any trace of valor completely diminished. I would bow my head completely but maintained a sliver of defiance in my refusal to say "amen." In retrospect, these minute challenges to the Christian school culture are pitiful, but, removed now from the situation, I see how oppressive that same culture was to me as a Jew.

One of the more overt challenges I faced was within the classroom confines itself. It is in this context that I had to analyze more thoroughly my multiple layers of identity. Particularly, I had to examine the best way to dispel anti-Semitic sentiment that emerged in the class without exercising my position of power oppressively. That is, how should I negotiate my multi-layered identity, one simultaneously marginalized as a Jew and privileged as a White teacher in the context of my rural school? How do I speak from the position being maligned without exercising an oppressive ideology attuned with the mentality of White supremacy culture and its circumlocution of power and truth?

My students have verbalized their own prejudices and have likely been a mouthpiece for their parents' prejudices, saying that Jews deserved their fate in the Holocaust when we read *Night*, the autobiographical novel by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, and that the Jews invite torture because they killed Jesus. Even in the political sphere, the presence of political contenders like David Duke eliminate the distinctions between religiously Jewish and Jewish-by-heritage and lump all of us together. Furthermore, while living among other Jews, I never felt the need to explain myself because there was a common understanding of the absurdity of Jewish stereotypes. I have had to answer earnest high schoolers' questions and explain that Jews do not have horns growing on their heads. Navigating this space has been particularly difficult.

On the one hand, it is my profession to dispel ignorance and present knowledge in constructive and nurturing ways. My duty is to support them in examining their preconceptions and welcoming questions in a manner that doesn't scold or inhibit the questioning itself. In the same breath, I am shocked that my students have internalized prejudices enough not only to believe them, but to repeat them. Off-handed, anti-Semitic

remarks are brazen and unflinching, but often they don't realize the problematic things they say. This complicates my Judaism even more: how do I give them the space to learn about and explore difference while not getting overly emotionally involved? Living among my own people, perhaps, blinded me to what those outside of my community think. Living in a place where I am not like everyone else has made me think more thoroughly about how I would define my Jewishness, particularly as a secularist.

My situation is not unique. Goldfield (2006) notes that "at first glance, few groups seem more out of place in the South than the Jew" (p. 60). He links this to a series of Jewish diaspora, and notices that, because many areas of the South put emphasis on lineage and heritage, these immigrant Jews seem particularly out of place. This creates tension among Jews and Gentiles, as a primary means of understanding (e. g., your family, your last name, where you attended school) is rooted in a practice that diasporic Jews cannot join.

In addition, Goldfield notes that much of the religious education directly villainizes Jews while incorporating Jewish text, a seemingly contradictory practice. He finds that "children learn to respect and adhere to the lessons of the Old Testament, but although numerous qualifiers frame the story of the crucifixion, many southern Gentiles learn early in their lives that Jews are Christ killers" (pp. 60-61). This affirms my experience in the classroom and confusingly puts me more at ease. I am somewhat pacified that these mis- and pre-conceptions aren't directed specifically at me, but I am also disturbed that this is a definable trend and way of thinking.

Research also supports my feelings of heightened Jewishness in Louisiana. According to Alper and Olson (2013), "the 'odd-man out' effect may heighten the salience of Jews living in less Jewish areas. The absence of the 'odd-man out' effect in more Jewish areas may allow Jews in those areas to take their identities for granted" (p. 101). While I have never been religious myself, there are, unsurprisingly, more opportunities to be religious in areas where there is a shared religion. For example, in Milwaukee, many of my neighbors made a Sukkah, a temporary hut adorned with branches in celebration of the harvest festival of Sukkot, without fear or concern of prejudice. The community was religious and supportive. However, in rural Louisiana, my Jewish identity has emerged more strongly than it had in Milwaukee because I am an ethnic minority in the region.

### **Application in the Classroom**

While there isn't a template answer as to how to properly combat prejudicial thinking, I posit that a reverse culturally relevant pedagogy can take place. Culturally relevant pedagogy, in quick, "advocates for a consideration of the culture of the students in determining the ways in which they are taught" (Emdin, 2016, p. 10). While much research focuses on teaching those from multicultural backgrounds, the same practices could easily be mirrored to apply to my own minority standing. If there were any doubt about the importance of exploring cultural differences and the imperative necessity for me to expose my students to the unfamiliar Jewish identity, Pinar (1996) alleviates these concerns by noting that "students must demonstrate cultural competence in the language and cultural practice of groups other than the one in which they hold exclusive or primary membership" (p. 324). It is through culturally relevant pedagogy and explorations of difference that they can learn about Judaism and, through these practices, diversity.

One suggestion that emerges from culturally relevant pedagogical thought, as made by Freeman and Webb (2018), is through a practice of positive disruption. While their focus revolves around racial positive disruption in a higher education curriculum, the same process could be used regarding Judaism in the secondary classroom. In their study, they note that explicitly addressing race in the classroom has been viewed as disruptive, if not hazardous. The study, however, highlights the benefits of explicitly discussing racial issues. Freeman and Webb find that explicit discussion of taboo topics, such as race, allows for more open and honest dialogue. Instead of shirking from the topic, students confronted their prejudices and latent stereotypes head-on in a conversation that was "positively disruptive, but not prohibitively onerous" (p. 151). Participants read supplemental texts pertaining to racism in various mediums including the short essay and the graphic novel. The inclusion of supplemental material beyond an anchor text gave rise to analyzing multiple representations and gave depth to discussions of race.

In addition to explicit dialogue about race, Freeman and Webb observed constant implementation of reflective practices. Students wrote journal entries and formalized papers on their experiences, and they were evaluated on their thoughtful participation and collaboration. Thus they were assessed in traditional ways through their cognitive

learning, and they were assessed based on their socio-emotional growth and levels of introspection. Initially, students were hesitant to engage in “touchy feely practices” (p. 142), but as the course progressed, they became more invested in the practices. Teachers gave feedback on their reflections, noting growth and pushing them to question assumptions. In all, allowing race to take a front seat permitted “classes ... to change focus more easily and to provide space for more creativity and collaboration” (p. 151). Approaching sensitive topics in a direct conversation, and using some of the aforementioned assessments, might yield similarly positive results. Students of the study reported thinking about race for the first time and, after the class, considered “‘how best to talk about race’ with friends and family members” (p. 146). Although the study focuses around a different subject and age level, the findings are encouraging.

Freeman and Webb’s ideas could seamlessly be integrated into my lesson plans on *Night*. The text itself provides the space to discuss the reception of the Jewish identity in Romania and the perception of Jews by non-Jews. By centering a text by a Jewish author, I broaden my students’ knowledge of Judaism and give an opportunity to explore difference, which would allow them to confront a voice and experience they might not have encountered otherwise and would allow ample time to explore representation and perceived identity through discussion, coupled with reflective practices such as journaling. Much of their misconception and anti-Semitism might simply correlate to lack of exposure, not a deep-seated bigotry. The explicit confrontation of anti-Semitic sentiments, as race was confronted in Freeman and Webb’s study, could yield positive results in my classroom and in my community.

Colby and Lyon (2004) also discuss the importance of multicultural education, particularly “how important it is to integrate multicultural literature in the classroom as one method for creating learning communities that acknowledge and celebrate diversity” (p. 27). They find that incorporating multicultural literature allows students to engage more thoroughly and tackle big ideas because it has the “power to dispel stereotypes” (p.27). The researchers find that the incorporation of multicultural literature allows for empathize and bridging gaps between groups of people. This process does not simply mean finding a character they like or with whom they share interests, but instead to

identify characters with whom they have core, almost spiritual commonalities. This practice dissolves lines of differences in hopes of unveiling unity in the human condition. Exercises surrounding finding themselves in the story might involve reflective journaling and writing from the vantage point of the character. The texts call students to put themselves in others' shoes in order to understand a different life experience, thus broadening cultural awareness and acceptance. This type of practice lends itself well to any character analysis but could be particularly useful in the classroom when introduced with texts featuring minorities. Having them write from the viewpoint of the protagonist in *Night* would be a clear way for them to practice empathy and embrace of racial and cultural differences. In doing so, they would notice the universality of the human condition and explore unifying attributes between all individuals, no matter their religious beliefs.

Sleeter (1995), although not in a secondary classroom, offers some culturally relevant pedagogical practices that lend themselves well to the high school English classroom. She proposes explicit group work for investigating other identities in classrooms where there is little diversity, in an effort to create "collective knowledge" (p. 431). While her work centers around racial diversity, the same methods could be applied to exploring religious diversity. She encourages allotting time for group research with the intention of reporting findings to the class at large, as likely the information they find enlightening or surprising will match a class of heterogeneously religious students. She also proposes "why" investigative writing. Students are to derive questions about different identities as a starting-off point for investigations. She illustrates a student's question of "why do African American males experience difficulties in schools" as the basis of a research project (p. 420). From such a simple question, power structures, economic disparities, and biases are unearthed. Similar research questions could be crafted as a starting-off point for investigation because they function as entrances into discussion and would serve well in the facilitation of identity work.

Additionally, *Teaching Tolerance*, an online curriculum created by the Southern Poverty Law Center, has a variety of lessons for expanding cultural understandings and deepening respect and appreciation for diversity. Particularly, the resource has many lessons on

Judaism, not solely focusing on the Holocaust. The website offers lessons discussing the practice of inaugural prayer, different accounts of protests movements, and Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movements, and questioning whether the academic calendar is equitable for all religions. The focus of these lessons, while centered on Jewish involvement and beliefs, also highlight the importance of understanding and examining multiple perspectives. In addition, the lessons focus on questioning previously held beliefs and offer ways to respectfully question these beliefs. For example, the objectives written by the author of the lesson plan “One Survivor Remembers” include “learn about antisemitism; learn about propaganda and stereotypes; make connections to current-day antisemitism, racism, prejudice, and bigotry” in attempts to explore the essential question of “what are the dangers of creating ‘us’ and ‘them’ labels?” The implementation of these lessons prepares students to analyze preconceptions and move toward growth. Using such lessons in the classroom supports authentic discussion, which, as noted earlier, is the first step in understanding difference.

In addition, *Teaching Tolerance* highlights the need for Black and Jewish students alike to explore each other’s culture. *Teaching Tolerance* notes that “African Americans and Jewish Americans have a long history of shared concerns .... In recent decades, however, members of both groups have observed that distrust and resistance are eroding this affinity” (Yellin, 1998). If I had had any doubt about the need to explicitly address anti-Semitic concerns, research highlights that need. Particularly in a rural school where encounters with Jews are rare, it is necessary to dispel misconceptions that may circulate.

Harven and Soodjinda (2016) also offer strategies on how to implement culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy. They emphasize the need for a classroom built on trust and support, suggesting that teachers explicitly set out norms for discussion and an overall atmosphere where self-exploration and opinions are appreciated. In this classroom, it is assumed that all students enter into the conversation with the best intentions and that the classroom is a place for growth and development. They then suggestion explicit group discussion around the concept of oppression and its many facets. In my classroom particularly, this would be fruitful. To discuss oppression of the Jewish people would not discount the oppression of my Black students, and approaching

oppression, micro-aggressions, and positive and negative stereotyping as branches from the same bigoted source would allow a fruitful exploration of power structures in the United States.

Though she does not offer best practices, Weiner (2010) examines ways in which Jewish and African American plights in the United States share commonalities. Using critical race method, she analyzes grassroots movements in which both groups have fought to have representation in curricula and collaborated to rework textbooks that employ Anglo-European hegemonic thinking. She also tracks each group's presence in the South as the "racialized other" (p. 11) and how comparing and contrasting their experiences "allows for a more nuanced understanding of the way in the schools shape racial meanings, patrol the boundaries of whiteness, and undergrid a system of oppression" (p. 2). In this way, the Jewish experience and the Black experience have historical similarities and further emphasize the importance of acknowledgement and discussion surrounding race and ethnicity.

The aforementioned scholars offer various approaches to delving into Judaism and Jewish identity. Importantly, each strategy invites discussion and dialogue, not lecture. As Freire (1970) notes, "without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. Dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing" (p. 73). This is paramount to my instruction, as it gives voice and room for student exploration without oppressive pedagogy from the teacher. The use of conversation as a pedagogical tool settles some of the reservations that I had had about my White identity's intersection with my Jewish identity. Through conversation, I do not mandate thought patterns or ideologies; students are presented with materials and are to engage in the exploration and analysis of these through constructive dialogue. I am able to step back and facilitate learning, rather than implement my own agenda, and give room for student voice. They discover and share their opinions and findings organically, relying on collaboration, cooperation, and conversation.

## Conclusion

Each year, the fact that I am not Christian is brought up in the classroom. It normally emerges when students, without hesitation, ask what church I go to. Each year, I feel the same indecision. I worry about how my credibility in their eyes might shift if they knew about my Jewish heritage. I worry, albeit minutely, about my safety. Do I avoid the topic by saying that I don't attend a church in their community because I live in Baton Rouge? Do I side step the question by saying that I haven't found a "church home" (and never will)? Inevitably, I decide to self-identify. Each year, it provokes questions and, often, genuine concerns about my everlasting soul. Each year, I choose to identify because I realize that I might be the only Jew, to their knowledge, that these students have met.

In all, despite the tension between being submerged in a praying community while being a secular Jew and the prejudices and anti-Semitism that arises, it is necessary to be a positive representation of Jewish identity. Theorists and researchers have provided resources on the value of discussions of Judaism in text and in current events, and the aforementioned resources offer valuable ways to enter into analysis of prejudice and identity, all while respecting boundaries and individual credence. It is through this authentic discussion and exploration that commonalities can be found. Particularly, I find that much of the scholarship surrounding critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy that I included allowed for me to present issues as a collaborative dialogue and prevent any unfair or unequal exercise of power, a hesitation that I had had.

While my exploration of my Judaism in the context of my school is still developing, it is evident that the work that I am doing has impact beyond the confines of the classroom. One student, nonchalantly, mentioned to me that his grandmother had called him a dirty Jew. He retorted to her that Jews aren't dirty and that, in fact, his teacher is a Jew. His willingness to discuss his grandmother's misconception with me, and his impulse to correct this anti-Semitism, proves to me that, while changing prejudices is not immediate, it does have value and larger implications.

## References

- Alper, B. A., & Olson, D. V. A. (2013). Religious population share and religious identity salience: Is Jewish identity more important to Jews in less Jewish areas? *Sociology of Religion*, 74(1), 82-106. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srs044>
- Colby, S. A., & Lyon, A. F. (2004). Heightening awareness about the importance of using multicultural literature. *Multicultural Education*, 11(3), 24-28. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ783082)
- Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom: A critical foundation for bicultural education*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Delpit, L. D. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood ... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Freeman, A. N., & Webb, L. (2018). Positive disruption: Addressing race in a time of social change through a team-taught, reflection-based, outward-looking law school seminar. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law & Social Change*, 21(2), 121-152. Retrieved from <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jlasc/vol21/iss2/2/>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Herder and Herder.
- Goldfield, D. (1997). A sense of place: Jews, Blacks, and White Gentiles in the American South. *Southern Cultures*, 3(1), 58-79. Retrieved from the America: History & Life database. (Accession No. 45761403)
- Harven, A. M., & Soodjinda, D. (2016). Pedagogical strategies for challenging students' world views. In R. Papa, D. M. Eadens, & D. W. Eadens (Eds.), *Social justice instruction: Empowerment on the chalkboard* (pp. 3-14). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

McCarthy, M. (2009). Beyond the wall of separation: Church-state concerns in public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(10), 714-719. Retrieved from the MasterFILE Complete database. (Accession No. 40735917)

One survivor remembers: Antisemitism. (n.d.). Retrieved October 20, 2018, from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-1998/around-the-freedom-table>

Pinar, W. F., Reynolds, W. M, Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (1996). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. New York: Peter Lang.

Sleeter, C. E. (1995). Reflections on my use of multicultural and critical pedagogy when students are white. In C. E. Sleeter & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference* (pp. 415-438). Albany: SUNY Press.

Weiner, M. F. (2010). *Power, protest, and the public schools: Jewish and African American struggles in New York City*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Yellin, E. (1998). Around the freedom table: Black and Jewish youths share a heritage of liberation. *Teaching Tolerance*, 13. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-1998/around-the-freedom-table>