

Scandinavia

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The limits of normality in Swedish public schools are defined by the majority society.¹ Structures that are somewhat invisible to participants in the school system uphold a structural marginalization of Muslim pupils and exclude them from normality. This is not only a question about what is taught in class as subjects or how questions about diet are resolved, it is also about how symbolic Muslim identities are viewed. This can be seen in the light of how time and space are structured in school.

In 1975, the Swedish government made a declaration that from then on Sweden was to be a multicultural society. A programme of three goals was put forward. Equality, freedom of choice and partnership were the keywords. Since then, Sweden has changed in many ways, and institutions to support the multicultural society have been created, become obsolete, reformed or closed down.

The discussion on the role of multiculturalism has affected the curriculum of the Swedish public school. Today the school is described as nondenominational and multicultural. The school is 'for all', no cultures or religions being subject to discrimination. The school is, however, not neutral. Certain key values are to be honoured, for example equality and democracy. The school is also meant to protect the freedom and integrity of the individual, and the teachings and atmospheres there are to be characterized by pluralism, tolerance, openness and respect for the dignity of each human being.

The idea of a nondenominational school was put forth in the curriculum of 1962, and in that of 1969 the instruction in 'Religion' changed its profile from Christianity to all religions (but with the main focus on Christianity). These reforms were not made to meet the demands of immigrant parents. Instead they mirrored the ideas of the Swedish majority society, especially the Social Democratic Party who then had political hegemony. Today the situation is different. Actual pluralism exists in the schools. The rest of this article will develop the difficulties of implementing the above-mentioned ideals in the everyday life of schools.

The rhythm of the majority

In school there is a certain rhythm of time for the day, week and year. It consists in public holidays, feasts, working hours, etc. It creates ideas of what normal distribution of time is. The rhythm reflects a Swedish secular worldview, but also a Swedish Christian heritage. It includes Christmas celebrations, Lucia, the Easter celebrations, a ceremony in a local church at the end of the term, etc. This idea of a normality of distribution of time is one plausibility structure of the majority society and as such it is often taken for granted. Parents, teachers and educators from the majority culture presuppose this normality and when they meet with other's opinions and traditions, they are forced to relativize their own tradition. There is a wide range of reactions, from protectionism to a will to change. One common reaction is: 'But it is important for all pupils to get to know the Swedish traditions to be able to participate in the society'. Besides presupposing a fixed 'Swedish culture', this is a kind of protectionism. Other things that are likewise important to understand in Swedish society are taught in class and not enacted as rituals. It sanctions some pupils' normalities; while others that would like to see, for example, other time normalities, are excluded.

The rhythm of the minorities

Muslim pupils are not just Muslim pupils. They carry other identities apart from the religious: national, ethnic, gender, and class

'A School for All' Muslim Pupils in Sweden

background. Furthermore, they also carry subcultural identities formed around musical styles, consumer patterns, political engagement, etc.² At the same time, however, 'Muslim' is a symbolic identity that connects a person to discourses on 'Muslim-ness' among both Muslim and non-Muslim groups.

In Swedish schools there are no special activities in connection with religious feasts other than traditional Swedish Christian ones.³ Thus, Id al-fitr and Id al-adha are not celebrated by a break in the normal time-flow of the week. Teachers do not read from a *sira* of Muhammad, or talk about the importance of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Instead Muslim pupils (and their parents) have to negotiate for the right to be free on certain extra days every year. Slowly, pragmatic solutions have developed. As late as 1993, the board of the Schools of Stockholm sent out a recommendation, advising the schools to give Muslim pupils some days off for the Ids if they so desired. The paper sent out by the board was called 'Fundamentalistic Muslims' demands on the School'. The choice of words signals that these demands are made by 'difficult' persons excluded from Swedish normality.

Some pupils want to try to fast during Ramadan. It is common for parents (if they place importance on Ramadan) to encourage their children to try to fast a couple of years before it turns into a religious duty. This begins with a day or two and then increases over time. The children get feedback and encouragement if they succeed in fasting. It is part of growing up and of taking on a grown person's responsibility.

One boy told me how he had to go to the school nurse during Ramadan. He had stomach-ache and head pain. The nurse suggested that he take a painkiller, but the boy said that he could not because he was fasting. The nurse then told him that it was not good for the body to fast and that all it resulted in was that pupils had difficulties following the lectures. She obviously became irritated because her proposed solution could not solve the problem.

This is only one example amongst many, but it fits into a pattern where Muslims are excluded from normality. The Ramadan fasting period and its rituals do not fit into the time flow at school (I am not arguing that it should or should not). Significant persons for the secondary socialization of the pupils, like teachers and other staff at school, generally do not confirm this kind of normality.

To move in school space

At certain schools in Sweden there are quite a few girls who wear the veil. As a female pupil from Eritrea recounted: 'When you go out, there are a lot of people who stare at you when wearing the veil. I mean outside of school'. The girl felt that inside the school no one cared if she wore a veil. But outside, she frequently had to deal with conflicts.

At another school with many Muslim pupils, a teacher conducted an experiment after a discussion that I had with her about positive recognition. She noticed that a girl had a new veil and remarked that it was

beautiful. The girl turned that teacher into her new idol and followed her around for almost a week. As the teacher claimed, this was probably the first time she had ever heard a non-Muslim adult saying something positive about her veil or even about her faith.

Amongst pupils I think the veil is seen more as a part of normality than amongst the adults at schools. For several teachers, especially female, the veil symbolizes female oppression. They find it hard to accept it as something normal to wear the veil. This dislike may be well hidden, but is sometimes detected by the pupils. When the above-mentioned teacher expressed something positive about the veil this came as a surprise for the girl.

The school is connected to the larger society's understanding of time and space. In it, the time and space normalities of the majority society are enacted. Being Muslim (committed or not) means to have a symbolic identity connected to time and space normalities other than those of the majority society. My point is that it is possible to see that in the socialization process of Muslim youth their symbolic identities as Muslims are often denied in school. But it is not as simple as it is sometimes presented: If the schools meet the needs and demands based on normative Islam, everything is fine. The symbolic identities will still be a problem. This is not about Islamic theology, nor is it very much about the practice. It is rather only about certain parts of the faith and practice that have consequences on behaviour and symbolic identities that contrast the time and space normalities of the majority. If schools are to be multicultural and 'schools for all', this will have to be looked into, especially since Islam as a phenomenon is highly disliked by the general public (we have good statistic material to prove that).

Some adjustments could easily be made. An important part of this is communication. Both the schools and the parents have to take their responsibility. On the one hand, parents could inform the school about religious feasts. On the other, schools could buy a multicultural calendar (there are at least two Swedish ones) with the dates of the main religious celebrations. Clearly, a well thought out strategy is necessary in changing the everyday experience of time and space normalities that tend to marginalize Muslim pupils into one which is truly multicultural. ◆

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Notes

1. 'Normality' refers to everyday practices that are sanctioned as normal in a given group. The practices are ordered in discourses. 'The view of the Swedish majority society' refers to values or systems of values promoted as representative for the majority of Swedes. In connection with schools, this often reflects middle class values.
2. There are at least 250,000 persons with a Muslim background in Sweden (no unobjectionable statistics are available). The largest groups are the Bosnians, Iranians, and Turks. There are also numerous groups from Iraq, Somalia, Palestine, Kurdistan, and smaller groups from several other countries.
3. Some changes have occurred during the last year. Certain schools in Malmö have rescheduled to fit in Ramadan.