

(In)tolerance and recognition of difference in Swedish schools

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During the last 65 years, Sweden has mainly been a migrant receiving country. In the post war years, Sweden received economic migrants from Finland and southern Europe. In the 1980s and 1990s the country mostly experienced family reunification from southern Europe and Finland. It also received asylum seekers from developing countries through its refugee resettlement programme. In recent years (2000-to date) migration to Sweden has mostly involved asylum seekers from southeastern and Eastern Europe, and the Middle east and intra EU movers. The population of Sweden today (2010) stands at 9.26 million and it is estimated that more than 12 percent of the population is of foreign background.

Faced with the challenge of an increasingly diverse population, Sweden adopted a multicultural policy already in 1975. This policy became an integral part of the Swedish model of welfare-state. In Swedish multiculturalism, welfare objectives such as “equality” (jämlighet) occupied a central position. Other policy objectives included “freedom of choice” (valfrihet) and “partnership” (samverkan). During the last decades, however, the model for promotion and redistribution of welfare has changed. This changes has also affected policies for multiculturalism. Thus, the matter of inclusion of migrants into society has been transformed to a matter of their insertion into the labour market. Integration policy consists mainly of measures promoting employability. The rights of minorities are left unchanged, but recent policy puts its emphasis on the responsibilities and rights of the individual, not on his or her cultural affiliation.

This shift in emphasis away from multiculturalism and into economic integration of migrants, has affected also education policy. It was already in 1969 that Sweden decided that its school system should be non-confessional, and should observe neutrality towards different religions. As the non European population in Sweden grew during the last 20 years, education policy has been putting emphasis on the reproduction of allegedly Swedish and Western values at school. Efforts combating racism and racist bullying at school have however also been implemented. The tension between individual rights and group-related rights was evident in the debates on the scope of religion in the Swedish school system, already in 2000. Discussions in media and political arenas have mostly focused on the enactment of *Muslim* belief practices in schools, and the establishment of *Muslim* independent schools: what could be tolerated, and what is beyond the limits of toleration?

Religious schools in general and Muslims schools in particular, are met by suspicion in Sweden.

Muslim independent schools

An independent school system was introduced in Sweden in 1992, paving the way for a considerable increase of private schools. The independent schools made it a lot easier than before to establish schools with a different orientation from municipal schools, such as special teaching methods (Montessori or Waldorf), a linguistic/ethnic orientation, or a certain religious profile. In 1993, Sweden's first Muslim school opened in Malmö. In 2009, the number of Islamic denominational school was nine – all of them compulsory schools. Still, establishment of Muslim schools does not follow from an effort to recognize the cultural needs of migrant minorities, but were made possible by a general ambition to decentralize and privatize primary and secondary education. With the establishment of independent schools, it became possible for religious education to find its way back to the Swedish school system. The sudden increase of confessional schools and in particular of Muslim denominational schools has received a good deal of attention, in the Swedish media as well as in the debate on educational policy in Sweden.

The latter have been subject to extensive critique. It is said that they are inappropriate to arrange education according to the standards of objectivity and comprehensibility given in the national curriculum, bring about values and norms alien to the Swedish society, might develop into a recruiting basis for future suicide bombers, and that they increase the social and ethnic segregation of the Swedish society. Also, it has been claimed that Muslim schools fail to meet the quality standards which prevail in the name of equivalence of education. Two Muslim schools have lost their authorization to organize primary education on these grounds. Still, there exist no comprehensive data which shows that the quality of education is lower in Muslim schools than in other independent schools. Apart from the hostility expressed by xenophobic populist political parties, parties on the left oppose independent school in general, thus promoting a return to the centralized state school system.

Full veiling in schools

In many western European countries, the practice of veiling has been contested and debated for several years. For some people, the headscarf has become a symbol representing a clash between different world-views, rather than a piece of cloth; it could be regarded as a symbol for patriarchal repression over women, a threat to the (self-proclaimed) openness of the liberal, parliamentary democracy, or as an act of resistance towards an unsympathetic secular and sometimes racist hegemony of the mainstream society. As a highly visible sign, the headscarf has also become a symbol for the more religiously active members of various Muslim groups.

The complete veiling practices of Burqa and Niqab, which cover the face, has been intensely debated in Sweden during the last ten years, particularly in relation to educational policy. During the years following the shift of millennium, a (very limited) number of young Muslims women claimed their right to dress in Burqa or Niqab at school, in accordance with their religious beliefs. As a response, the Swedish National School Agency declared in 2003 the rights of headmasters to prohibit those veiling practices at their schools, if it was found that they rendered educational tasks difficult.

At the end of the decade, a renewed and heated debate occurred, when a Stockholm School was reported to the Ombudsman against discrimination (DO) by a young woman who had been expelled because of her Burqa. In the 2010 national election, a number of political parties declared that they wanted to maintain the right to issue local prohibitions in this matter. Nevertheless, at the end of 2011 the Discrimination Ombudsman claimed that the local prohibitions were inconsistent with the laws against discrimination, but chose not to take the case to court. Thus, there is as yet no legal precedent on the issue.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

The findings presented here come from two case studies, on the tolerance of Muslim independent schools and on the practice of wearing a full veil at school/college. The purpose of the two case studies was threefold. First, we described the general attitudes among teachers, headmasters and other professionals with an interest in educational matters to Islamic schools and the practice of wearing Burqa or Niqab in public schools. Second, we described which arguments were employed in the opposition of those phenomena, and for the closing-down of those schools or the prohibition of the abovementioned veiling practices. Third, we analyzed the ideological and policy-related underpinnings of those arguments.

Case Study I: Muslim independent schools

Although no interviewees argued for the shutting down of Muslim schools, they expressed a number of arguments against those schools. Muslim schools were met by suspicion and opposition by most interviewees. First of all, it was claimed that these schools increase the social and cultural segregation, thus making the integration of migrants into mainstream society more difficult. Second, it is suspected that the quality of education in these schools is low, although no-one claims to have evidence for this. Third, it was also claimed (although it was not an opinion held by many) that religious schools infringed on the universal right of the child to choose his or her path in life, regardless of the parental religious inclination. Thereby, the state is given priority over the parents in deciding what is good or right for the children in school. A common theme in these arguments is that the prevalence of Muslim independent schools threatens the *equivalence* of education in the Swedish school system. The term “equivalence” is keyword in Swedish educational policy, and has a number of meanings. First, it expresses a wish to uphold a school system which promotes social justice by delivering education of equal value for all. Second, it also signifies an abidance by the law (and the content of the national curricula). Thus, a strive for social justice and the rule of law are used as arguments against the recognition of minority claims and/or rights.

Which attitudes do school practitioners have to Muslim belief practices and schools, and why?

Case Study II: Complete veiling in schools

A number of objections to the practice of wearing Burqa or Niqab in schools and more generally were also put forth. In contrast to the media debate on this topic, the argument of gender equality was downgraded. Rather, the interviewees focused on the problems that full veiling is assumed to create in identification and communication. It was said that full veiling obstructed the possibility of identifying the students at school, and also rendered the communication (and hence the instructions) at school more difficult. In comparison with the question of Islamic denominational schools, the non-tolerant stance was more manifest,. The wearing of Burqa or Niqab was associated with phenomena such as mischief and “the hidden”, casting suspicion over the practice in question. Several interviewees claimed that a teacher must see the face of the student in order to instruct and educate. The practice of veiling was also questioned with reference to universal human rights, as the rights of the child. It was regarded as an illegitimate parental influence on children and adolescents.

What do we learn from this?

It seems that the imperatives of multiculturalist policy – the recognition of other groups’ practices, norms and values – do not always apply in the Swedish school system. Although the legislation allow for Muslim independent schools as well as full veiling at public schools, there exist a certain opposition against the particular expressions of Muslim faith. The opposition towards Islam is embedded in a discourse which heralds as key values such as individual freedom, freedom from religion and secular education. Thus, there seems to be a conflict between different highly appreciated values – the

freedom of religion versus the freedom of the individual and the freedom *from* religion. Key values such as the sovereign rights of the individual are used as an argument to define and circumscribe tolerance and claims for recognition. It seems like school practitioners in Sweden do not give priority to the project of combine individual and collective rights, and to question their secular frame of interpretation.

From a perspective of tolerance and acceptance, though, it seems to be wise to acknowledge the right to wear burqa and niqab in school. The wearing of full veiling *might* be the result of an upbringing which borders on religious indoctrination. On the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility that a secular upbringing might as well be just as authoritarian. Taking for granted that a religious upbringing is more rigid than a secular seems prejudiced; and an unreasonable vantage point for the development of educational policy. Therefore, it may not be the case that freedom from religion automatically applies in this matter. Following a provisional neutrality in relation to freedoms *of* and *for* religion, it seems wise to leave out such far-reaching prohibitions as the prohibitions of certain garments, unless they are obviously offensive or insulting towards certain groups or individuals. What concerns the supposed pedagogical problems depicted above, which are employed as arguments against the practices of Burqa and Niqab, it seems adequate to refer to the fact that people with light as well as severe visual impairments do not show general learning difficulties. Thus, it is possible to develop teachings and instructions without having mutual eye contact. Full veiling *might* call for the development of teaching methods, but it does not necessarily provide us an insurmountable obstacle.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

Legislation

- ✓ Do not allow for local discriminatory practices at schools; makes sure that the laws against ethnic and religious discrimination are in force

Educational policy

- ✓ Acknowledge the existing religious diversity of in everyday life at schools, as well as in the national curricula and in local steering documents. Local as well as national rule systems should safeguard religious diversity.
- ✓ Policy makers are obliged to create awareness, through local and national educational policy, about the proliferation of anti-religious and anti-Muslim beliefs, in teacher's education as well as in teaching practice.
- ✓ Make sure that teachings on religion are devoid of racist and/or secular prejudices (this particularly apply to the teaching about Islam)
- ✓ In the organization of schooling, it should facilitated for discussions and exchange of opinions between secular and religious students and teachers
- ✓ In their general educational practice, teachers should support the inclination to question the centrality of secular mind-sets and frames of interpretation – among students as well as themselves.
- ✓ The national curricula and syllabi must provide guidelines for teachings on religion in which the contextual nature of religious expression is made clear.

Methodology

The main part of the empirical material used for this report consists of interviews with 22 persons – nine students at the teachers program, three teachers, three headmasters, two union representatives, two civil servants, one jurist, one imam and one representative of a political party (the Liberal Party, Folkpartiet). The teachers worked in secondary education, in schools with a relatively high number of students of foreign decent. All headmasters had long experience of working in such areas, although some of them now worked in other areas. The civil servants worked in municipal social care and refugee reception, in area with a relatively high proportion of migrants from Islamic countries. The imam worked at the biggest mosque in Stockholm. The union representatives represented the two big Swedish teachers union. All interviewees worked or studied in the greater Stockholm area. The interviews were conducted during spring 2011. Articles published in newspapers in the period 2009-2010 (*Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, *Göteborgs-Posten* och *Svenska Dagbladet*) and on the internet (*Newsmill*, *Skolvärlden*) in relation to the electoral campaign, and the debate following the above-mentioned report to the Ombudsman on discrimination have also been analyzed.

Project Identity

- Acronym:** ACCEPT PLURALISM
- Title:** Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
- Short Description:** ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups. Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition. The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.
- Website:** www.accept-pluralism.eu
- Duration:** March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
- Funding Scheme:** Small and medium-scale collaborative project
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- Consortium:** 19 partners (15 countries)
- Coordinator:** European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
- Person Responsible:** Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
- EC officer:** Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer