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 marginalize Muslim pupils and exclude them from normality. This is not only a question about what is taught in class as subjects about diet are resolved, but 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 School for All". This 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. This 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 relativise their own tradition. There is a wide range of reactions, from protectionism to a relativization of theSwedish traditions to be able to participate in the school. These presuppositions are seen as 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 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 the adults, especially female, the veil symbolizes female oppression. They find it hard to accept it as something normal to wear. This dislike may be well hidden, but is sometimes detected by the pupils. When the above-mentioned teacher expressed some positive attitude towards 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 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 seems 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 society. 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 feasts for schools). 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.

Jonas Otterbeck is a PhD candidate in Islamology at Lund University, Sweden, and a lecturer in International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Malmö University. E-mail: Jonas.Otterbeck@fesl.lu.se

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 the 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 Bengalis, Indians, and Turks. There are also numerous groups from Iraq, Somalia, Palestinians, Kurdish, and smaller groups from several other countries.
3. Some changes have occurred during the last year. Certain schools in Malmö have redeshced to fit in Ramadan.