Islamic schools in Sweden: institutional context, societal conflicts and the limits to tolerance

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Abstract
The overall aim of this article is to describe and analyze how and why different categories of practitioners in the Swedish school system object to the establishment of Muslim independent schools. The article is based on qualitative data, and the main part of the empirical material consists of interviews with 22 individuals – mostly teacher students, teachers, headmasters, union representatives, civil servants, and others. A number of alleged disadvantages with the establishment of Islamic denominational schools are expressed. They are held to be divisive, both culturally and socially, and the quality of their instructions is supposed to be inadequate, in relation to the standards explicated in the national curriculum. The objections to the existence of denominational schools are related to central notions in Swedish educational policy, above all the notion of equivalence, which signifies a demand for abidance by the national curriculum and syllabi, as well as a priority of equalizing measures over freedom of choice. Thus, equalizing and integrative objectives seem to be vital, but the quest for recognition of minority beliefs systems is circumscribed. These findings are connected, we argue, to the fact that the establishment of Muslim independent schools in Sweden did not follow from a multiculturalist program of recognition, or a concern for questions of freedom of religion and cultural rights, but as a side effect of the implementation of New Public Management, and influences from neo-liberal political philosophy. The limits to tolerance of Islamic schooling are, in our context, articulated in tandem with a critique of neo-liberal governance of education.

Introduction
Since the beginning of the 1980’s, state-funded Muslims schools have emerged in Europe, even in Sweden. Sweden has a long history of not permitting minorities to establish minority schools (although there are a few exceptions, see below), but changed the conditions for these schooling activities in 1992. Then it was made easier for private actors, among them religious actors, to obtain state funding for independent schooling. As we know, there has been considerable debate about these schools in several countries (Maussen & Bader 2012), and Sweden is no exception in that matter (Berglund 2011, Hertzberg 2011); the quality of education in Muslim independent schools has been questioned, as has the capacity of religious congregations to provide objective and comprehensible education, or their will to ensure the students/pupils their freedom of thought, conscience and expression (Gerle 1997, Roth 2007). Most of all, it has been claimed that these schools are divisive, and augment the social and cultural segregation in Sweden (Hertzberg 2011, cf. Halstead & McLaughlin 2005).
Today, Islam is Sweden’s largest non-Christian community, and for many of those, it is of importance to create an educational strategy where young people can learn not only about Islam, but also to be educated in Islam, i.e. “a confessional education were Islam is the norm and where the education is intended to show the child how to live a life in the best possible way according to Islam” (Berglund 2006:204). In that matter, the provision or accessibility of Islamic education may be regarded as an important matter or recognition (Roth 2007), in so far as confessions and religious beliefs often provides material for the formation of social identity (Jenkins 2007), and the religious congregation a basis for the development of loyalties. Moreover, the freedom of religion may be interpreted in a way that makes denominational education an indispensable part of the execution of that freedom. If these arguments are taken seriously, opponents of Islamic education, in Sweden and elsewhere, have to provide arguments equally elaborated and sophisticated: which are the reasons for excluding Muslim denominational schools from Swedish multiculturalism and the granted freedom of religion?

An amendment in the Swedish educational act of 1992 made the establishment of independent schooling, and Muslim independent schooling, more favorable than earlier. All of a sudden, a juridical and institutional space for religious minorities to establish denominational schools emerged. Since then, a number of Islamic denominational schools have started. There are some indications that they cater a deeply felt need. According to a study by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNEA, sw. Skolverket), there are a number of reasons why Muslim parents send their children to Muslim schools: negatively biased and inaccurate views of Islam in municipal schools (cf. Härenstam 1993, Otterbeck 2005), disregard for common Islamic rules respecting chastity, diet, fasting, dress, prayer, and so forth, poor religious education by the standards of Islam, insufficient discipline, fear of exposure to narcotics and alcohol and too great a diversity of immigrant groups in the neighboring municipal schools (Skolverket 1997, cf. Berglund 2009). Thus, Muslim parents send their children to Muslim schools for purposes of security and wellbeing, not only religion. Other studies (Bunar & Kallstenius 2006, 2007, Berglund 2008) points in a similar direction: it is also a matter of avoiding discrimination and obtaining acceptance of difference. These circumstances highlights the importance of the question spelled out above: which are the reasons for excluding Muslim denominational schools from multiculturalism and freedom of religion?

The latter question is the starting point for this article. It studies the prevalence of arguments against or objections to Muslim independent schools in Sweden, and one particular setting is chosen: the way different stakeholders in the sphere of schooling and education object to or argue against the above-mentioned educational practices and institutions. This article focuses on standpoints and arguments that are developed by different stakeholders in compulsory youth schooling, such as teachers, headmasters, teachers’ students, social workers, politicians, etc. Methodologically, it is based on a qualitative interview study carried out in the Greater Stockholm Area. The study was a part of extensive European comparative research project, Accept Pluralism, which described and analyzed the limits to tolerance, pluralism and social cohesion in Europe today.

The focus of the article is set on arguments against and objections to Muslim independent schools, and its purpose is threefold. First, we will describe the general attitudes among teachers, headmasters and other categories of professionals with an interest in educational matters towards the existence of Islamic denominational schools. Second, we will describe which arguments that are employed in the opposition to these schools, and implicitly or explicitly argue for the closing-down of
those schools. Third, we will analyze the ideological and policy-related underpinnings of those arguments.

The disposition of the article runs in the following way. The introductory part of the article consists of four parts, apart from these paragraphs. First, some short facts about compulsory schooling in Sweden is presented. The second part consists of a brief description of the political underpinnings that have shaped Swedish educational policy since World War II, and its development from an integrated educational system and a commitment to social justice, to the New Public Management (NPM) promises of “freedom of choice” and decentralization. While paying attention to developments of relevance regarding the acceptance or intolerance of Islamic faith schools, we choose to set focus on the concept of “Equivalence” (sw. Likvärdighet). First, it is a remarkably vigorous concept, which has fulfilled the function of a central aim in both the abovementioned policy contexts; secondly, it has some relevance for the development of arguments on recognition in education and the freedom of religion in schools.

In the third section of the introductory part, we outline the development of official Swedish multiculturalism, and its (lack of) influence on educational policy. As the fourth and final part of the introduction, we briefly describe the legal and institutional context which has paved the way for the establishment of Islamic faith schools. As will be described there, this process was primarily a side effect of the establishment of a voucher system, in line with the guidelines of NPM of schools, by and large unforeseen by those responsible for its implementation.

After the introductory part of the article follows its main part, the presentation of the study. Here, we encounter the arguments of a limited number of the interviewees that we met during the fieldwork. Their arguments and standpoints are excerpted since they were the most elaborated and/or explicates occurring in our material. As will be laid out in detail below, the interviewees expressed some manifest objections towards the establishment of Muslim independent schools, although they seldom expressed clear-cut calls for the closing of these schools. Their objections are filed under two headings: arguments on social divisiveness and equivalence in relation to abidance by the law and quality in education. The article ends with a short summary of our findings and a discussion focusing on the ways in which the objections to (and lack of tolerance towards) Muslim independent schooling are related to the two main paradigms in Swedish educational policy since World War II.

The educational system in Sweden

In Sweden, attendance at school is compulsory for all children aged 7-16. Compulsory school is mandatory and free of charge. The vast majority of schools are municipally-run. Usually, children attend a municipal school close to their homes. However, pupils and their parents are entitled to choose another municipal school, or a school that is run independently. The independent schools are open to all children and must have been approved by the Swedish School Inspectorate which scrutinizes all applications and has regular evaluations of the quality of these schools. Teachings in independent schools has more or less the same expressed objectives as those of the municipal school, but can have an orientation that differs from that of the municipal schools. The definition of an independent school is that the school is run by a private actor such as a company or an association. If the school does not comply with current regulations, the Swedish School Inspectorate can withdraw its permit. In several cases, independent schools have a different orientation from the
municipal, including special teaching methods (Montessori or Waldorf), a linguistic/ethnic orientation, or a certain religious profile, even though there is a non-negligible number of schools whose orientation similar to the public schools (Skolverket 2011a).

The schooling system is decentralized; a number of general goals and guidelines are formulated on the national, central level, and then the municipalities and the local schools are given the responsibility to design and work out the activity which has to fulfill the national objectives; it is a goal-based system with a high degree of local responsibility. The guidelines and the goals are expressed in a number of steering documents. The national curriculum (läroplanen) describes the school's basic goals and guidelines, and also its fundamental values, the so-called “value-base” (värdegrund). There is also a national syllabus for each individual subject, and a national time schedule which states the minimum guaranteed time that pupils are entitled to teacher-led instruction in the various subjects. At the municipal level, there is a municipal school plan that shows how the municipality’s schools are to be organised and developed, and at the local level, we find a working plan for each school, which is an adaptation of the contents of the national curriculum, the syllabi and the school plan to the organization, specific work methods and local circumstances of that school (Skolverket 2011b).

Political context 1: from equality to equivalence and freedom of choice

The Swedish educational system went through substantial changes during the 20th century, from the so-called “parallel school system”, consisting of separate schools for the elite and the working class, to a formally integrated - still internally deeply divided - comprehensive school system (Bunar 2008). During this process, which in main was carried out by social democratic governments, education was particularly seen as one of the main instruments for achieving more social equality in a developing welfare society and in ensuring social citizenship, especially during the years of social politics expansion in the 1950’s and 60’s (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002, Richardson 2010). Virtually every aspect of education that supposedly contributed to the reproduction of social stratification was changed. These reforms promoted equality of opportunity and outcome through a system which deliver education of the same quality to everyone. The principle of non-separation was heralded. It aimed at counteracting differentiation of children into schools based on class, gender or ethnicity; education was “regarded as an instrument for equalizing class differences, providing a meeting place for children with different social and cultural backgrounds and an education free of religious or commercial involvement” (Bunar 2008:424), thus promoting integration within one single community of citizens, or “demos”.

During the 1970’s and 80’s, however, the goal of equality, was redefined and re-articulated in terms of the goal of equivalence, which stipulates that the education delivered at school should be of equal value to everyone. There were at least two distinct causes behind this change (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002: 86-91). First, it was an attempt to avoid the radical political connotations of the term “equality”. Second, it was a pragmatic adjustment to the difficulties involved in implementing equality in education; since the capacity and hence the needs of the pupils varied, the focus should be on supplying education that was of value for everyone, rather than a uniform format. Different needs had to be recognized, and an overall homogeneity was no longer regarded as desirable.
Not only was diversity in needs acknowledged. Gradually, the question of parental influence over education became important. The anti-centralist tendency grew stronger during the 1980’s, when the ideological tenets of neo-liberalism and the ideals set out in the NPM agenda gained ground – in education as well as in other sectors of public administration and production of welfare goods (Green Pedersen 2002). Between 1992 and 1994, a number of educational reforms were carried through in Sweden, which changed the organization and creation of primary and secondary education in a fundamental way. The municipalities gained much more influence over primary and secondary education; parents were given the right to decide which school their children should attend, and a voucher system was introduced, which gave parents the right to choose between public and private (so-called independent) schools (Green Pedersen 2002, Bunar 2008).

“Freedom of choice” became one of the overriding principles in official discourses on education, the ethos of equality lost its appeal, and the social ambitions of the educational system became diffuse (Blomquist & Rothstein 2000). Education became a private good, and an instrument for individual capital acquisition, rather than a public good (Englund 1993). However, the goal of equivalence maintained its strong position (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002), as it was compatible with the promotion of a new system of accountability and its emphasis on the evaluation of student achievements (cf. Englund 2003). In this new context, the goal of “equivalence” also became a keyword in the endeavors to control the outcomes/products from public as well as private suppliers of education, assuring that the same standard of education is provided throughout the country. The goal of “equivalence” tends to be interpreted as “to offer education in accordance with the national curricula” or “to offer instructions by qualified teachers”.

The advent of the independent schools in 1992 has posed a serious challenge to the basic ideological foundations of the Swedish educational system (Bunar 2008), and the principle of non-separation. With the establishment of independent schools, the development was going in the opposite direction. High achievers and students of middle class background are concentrated to a specific range of schools (Bunar 2008). A number of studies (e.g. Daun 2003, Arnman et al 2004), among them studies from SNAE (Skolverket 1996, 2003), claim that the selected use of school choice has augmented not only social segregation in Sweden, but also the ethnic, particularly in schools in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. A good-sized number of students have left low-achieving and stigmatized suburban schools in the above mentioned cities, choosing high-status middle-class schools in areas predominantly populated by non-migrant Swedes, but recent studies indicate that they haven’t reached relevant “measures of integration” such as raising their average grades or making friends with children living in the school’s attendance zone (Bunar & Kallstenius 2007, Bunar 2010). Those developments suggest that the goals of equality and freedom of choice are not wholly compatible. However, it must be noted that after 20 years of developments in educational policy under the aegis of “freedom of choice” and decentralization even the advocates of such a policy have raised doubts over its adequacy and efficacy. In recognition of the limitations of a decentralized school system, the promotion of equivalence has been strengthened in the new national curricula, which was implemented during 2011 by the right-wing liberal government. For example, the objectives in the national curricula are made more explicit, and the content of each subject is specified (Skolverket 2011a, 2011b).
Political context 2: tolerance, recognition and education policy

In Sweden, policies towards different immigrant and minority groups during the first two decades of the post-war migration were in general assimilatory, and the tolerance for or recognition of various cultural identities and customs among minority groups was absent from the official political agenda. The period of assimilationist policy was not put to an end until 1975, when multiculturalism was added to the Swedish model of welfare-state politics (cf. Roth & Hertzberg 2010). In Swedish multiculturalism, welfare ideology objectives focused on “equality” held a central position; the other main objectives were “freedom of choice” and “partnership”. The goal of freedom of choice implied that public initiatives were to be taken to assure members of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Sweden a genuine choice between retaining and developing their cultural identity and assuming a Swedish cultural identity (Hammar 1985: 33).

When it came to education policy, the relatively far-reaching promises of recognition of cultural expressions of non-dominant ethnic groups were hardly fulfilled at once. The issue of cultural diversity was not mentioned in the national curricula of 1980, let alone the question of religious schooling or faith schools (Runfors 2003). Certain attention was given to the specific demands of migrant children in educational policy, mainly focusing on the eventuality of shortcomings and learning problems, especially when learning Swedish (Borevi & Strömblad 2004). The category of migrant children became singled out as problematic category, in need of special measures (Gruber 2001).

Political scientist Karin Borevi (2002, ch. 5) points out that the then attempts to adapt the Swedish educational system to the new multi-cultural or multi-ethnic conditions, and the discussions that followed these attempts, highlights some of the ideological tensions in the Swedish model of welfare policy. On the one hand, it was considered desirable to accept and recognize the fact Swedish citizens now enjoyed membership in different ethnic communities, or “ethnos”. On the other hand, it was still seen as desirable to promote integration within one single community of citizens, or “demos”; the equalizing and integrative objectives of the compulsory school project were still in force. Although the goal of recognition was paid attention to, it could in practice be subordinated to the goal of social cohesion, Borevi (2002) concludes. If any possible special needs of migrant pupils were considered, it was primarily in order promote their integration into the mainstream society, and hence to promote the overall social cohesion, not to recognize their belonging to an ethnos that was seen as external to the imagined community of the majority.

During the 1980’s, however, the idea of recognition got more influential in educational policy. Instructions for a general “inter-cultural” pedagogy were introduced, thus “promoting an enhanced understanding of and respect for differences in cultural expressions” (Rubinstein Reich & Tallberg Broman 2000:11). Following the neoliberal turn in Swedish educational policy during the late 1980’s (above), in which the equalizing objectives were subordinated to the promotion of freedom of choice, the diversity in demands on public schooling was more and more paid attention to. The national curricula of 1994 (Lpo 94) were the first steering document which clearly stated that Sweden is a multi-ethnic and multicultural society (Hällgren et al 2006). Still, the objective of recognizing cultural diversity was not central, and focus was set on equal rights and responsibilities (cf. Roth & Hertzberg 2011). The need for anti-discriminatory measures was emphasized (Hällgren et al 2006), but also the adherence to common and allegedly Swedish fundamental values (“värdegrund”) in education.
In 2002, a number of groups – Finns, Jews, Meänkieli (or Tornedalsfinnish), Roma and Sámi - achieved the status of “national minorities”. The municipalities became responsible for ensuring that all pupils completing primary school has some basic knowledge of the national minorities’ culture, language, religion and history; moreover, they were obliged to provide instructions in mother tongue in schools for the national minorities, in accordance with the general provisions. Thus, it can be claimed that the demands of national or migrant minorities to a substantial degree are recognized, thus following the guidelines provided by the multicultural political ideology (Borevi & Strömblad 2003).

The legal and institutional context
As described above, the introduction of an independent school system in 1992 paved the way for a considerable increase of private schools in Sweden. The independent schools made it a lot easier than before to establish schools with a different orientation from the municipal schools. In 1993, Sweden’s first Muslim school opened. Now, religious education was back in the Swedish school system, after a long period of programmatic secularism. With the implementation of the national curricula of 1969, it was decided that the Swedish school system should be non-confessional or non-denominational. The subject of “Christianity” was changed to “religion”, which reflected a change of perspective.

Until 1962, the purpose was to foster the pupils in the Christian faith; that year a school reform required the subject of Christianity to maintain a neutral profile with respect to questions of faith. From 1969, the purpose was to teach on religions and religiosity, as social and existential phenomena, in a comparative and critical way. The change implied the end of preaching Christianity in the Swedish school system. Given the special status of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, however, and its influence in religious studies more generally (including the university system), it is fair to say that the subject of “religion” still was permeated by the dominance of the study of Christianity, in comparison to the study of other world religions.

The fact that religion and denominational educations was discarded in 1969 could be seen as the end result of a long and efficacious process of secularization in the Swedish society. During the first decades of public education in Sweden, the Swedish protestant national church held a strong influence over all teaching activities in the country, a position once installed through the parish catechetical meeting system which was institutionalized during the 17th century, when the ability to read and the basic knowledge on Christian theology in the population was examined by local clergymen. Nevertheless, secularization of the schools occurred slowly and peacefully during the 20th century. Gradually, the ethos of Christianity and religion was replaced by the secular ethos of equality which was central to the integrated comprehensive school system (Rothstein 1986).

Still, the scope for a religious (i.e. a distinctly Islamic) curriculum is limited (Berglund 2009, cf. Gardell 2010), even in denominational independent schools. In the national curricula of 1994, it was indeed stated that the strict rule of non-confessionality does not apply for the religious independent schools. In order with Sweden’s Education Act, some general goals has to be achieved whether the schools are independent or public (Berglund 2009), such “imparting, installing and forming in pupils those fundamental values on which our society is based”, which is “[i]n accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism by fostering the individual a sense of justice,
economic privileges. Crucial problems in this context are how well schools of this kind fulfill more complicated is the route to state sponsored faith schools or faith schools it is parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions (Grace 2012).

Before 1992, a very limited number of denominational private schools has existed outside the public school system, as for example the Jewish Hillel school in Stockholm, founded in 1954 (Peste 2007), and the century-old catholic schools S:t Erik in Stockholm and Queen Astrid in Gothenburg. With regard to the establishment of the Jewish school in Stockholm 1954, the political reasons behind the decision did not include any references to the right of freedom of religion or similar reasons. The persecution of the Jews during World War Two justified instead the special position in terms of educational arrangements. Hence, the decision makers were eager not to generalize the decision to any other religious groups.

The absence of human rights arguments in the political debate on faith schools since the 1950’s reveals that the human rights discourse did not appear as a pivotal discourse in politics. Up until now, one could say that well known arguments in the debate such as “segregation arguments”, “equality/equivalence arguments” and “security arguments” have not been explicitly framed in terms of human rights principles, even though the former bring human rights considerations to the fore. As noted above, social equality was the dominant political concept during the Social Democratic era, not liberties and freedoms such as freedom of religion. When “freedom of choice” became a salient concept in the beginning of the 1990s, it was a part of the implementation of NPM, bearing on influences from neo-liberal political philosophy. Questions of freedom of religion and cultural rights were not foregrounded. The increased options for religious groups to start faith schools was a side effects of a reform that was initiated by other considerations, such as an increased freedom to choose schools on the basis of their pedagogy and social profiles (Roth 1999).

However, in several current debates on faith schools references to human rights have become more common, not at least with reference to children’s rights even though they may not play a dominant role (see the interview section below). One reason for this development – that human rights claims are seen as relevant for issues concerning faith schools - is the increased legal and political importance of human rights instruments such as The European Convention on Human Rights. (An instrument such as the European Convention has also become domestic law in Sweden whiles the Convention on Children’s rights have not even though Sweden has ratified the latter.) Crucial questions in these current debates concern how far one could argue in favor of faith schools, on the basis of for example the right to freedom of religion article 9 in the European Convention on Human Rights. In article 14 in the European Convention on Human Rights it is stated that “the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions” (Grace 2012).

However, it is not just a question of the parents’ rights to choose schools for their children but also the children’s rights to freedom of choice and being able to be exposed to a variety of life views. But it is not a straight route to faith schools from the starting point “the right to freedom of religion. Even more complicated is the route to state sponsored faith schools or faith schools that are granted other economic privileges. Crucial problems in this context are how well schools of this kind fulfill
educational objectives such as objectivity, impartiality, inclusiveness and values such as tolerance/respect and compassion. It is also important to see how well these schools present a safe and “humanizing” environment. Given that so many basic needs and rights claims are at play in the organization of a school environment, a so called balancing approach with reference to the right of freedom of religion is needed; there is no clear hierarchy among different rights but the fulfillment of them must take into account the fulfillment of the other rights.

In order to sum up: the introduction of Muslim independent schools in Sweden did not follow from any concerns regarding the recognition of minority cultures or the freedom of religion, but as a side effect from the implementation of NPM in primary and secondary education. In Sweden, assimilationism was replaced by multiculturalism in 1975, but for a long time, the latter was met by some resistance when adapted to education policy. Until the early 90’ies, social justice, the countering of differentiation and the reproduction of Demos was prioritized in the compulsory school system, although the idea of “freedom of choice” in educational matters begun to gain impact even before the implementation of NPM. Needs of migrant children were mainly considered in order to promote their integration in the mainstream society. Intercultural pedagogy was introduced in educational policy during the 1980’s, however, as well as commitments to combat racism in the 1990’s.

With the advent of NPM in education policy, diversity and freedom of choice was heralded in a general way, but no commitments to multiculturalist recognition were made. Rather, in reverse: cultural uniformity is emphasized, as is the “impacting of fundamental values” in accordance with “Christian tradition and Western humanism” at public schools. Up until recently, the discourse of Human Rights and freedom of religion has been more or less absent in education policy. Moreover, as a link between the dominant paradigms in Swedish public education, the notion of equivalence must be noticed. It merges the strive for equal opportunities, central for preceding policy expressions, with the calls for quality measurement, evaluations and accountability, inherent in the current governing principles of NPM.

**On the (lack of) acceptance of Islamic denominational schools in Sweden**

As noted above, the sudden increase of denominational schools has received a good deal of attention, in public media as well as in the debate on educational policy in Sweden, and the same goes for the establishment of Muslim denominational schools. A number of arguments are recurrently voiced in public media and academia. When it comes to the quality of the education, the ability of Islamic denomination schools to pursue teaching has been continuously questioned in wide circles, as were their capacity to meet the standard of equivalence (Francia 1998, cf. Skolverket 1997). Other arguments have also been raised. It has been claimed that religious congregations by the transcendent nature of their dogmas are prone to give their own message - and the world-views conveyed therein – priority over other systems of belief, such as other religions and life views, and over scientific knowledge; thus, they are seen as inappropriate to arrange education according to the standards of objectivity (sw. “saklighet”) and comprehensibility (sw. “allsidighet”) given in the national curriculum and the national syllabi (Gerle 1997, cf. Roth 2007).
Related to this argument is a third one, which claims that denominational schools violate the basic rights of the children such as their freedom of thought, conscience and expressions, given the religious underpinnings of the schools (cf. Roth 2007). A fourth argument that has been put forth is that Islamic schools bring about values and norms alien to the Swedish society, for example regarding gender roles and the nature of the relations between the sexes (Gerle 1997). Fears has also aroused that Islamic schools might develop into “a natural recruiting basis for future suicide bombers” (Sabuni 2006, cf. Lillman 2006). Still, this fifth argument, which is stressing domestic safety, is quite seldom expressed, at least outside the realms of right-wing populist discourse. A sixth argument, finally, claims that Islamic denominational schools are divisive and augment the social and ethnic segregation of the Swedish society. This argument was central for many of our interviewees, and is described in detail below.

Defenders of faith schools mean that there are many varieties of schools that may not be subject of this criticism. For example, the segregation argument trades upon assumptions that there are not many other important arenas of integration in the society. Another assumption may be that the overall diversity in the faith schools is minor. Divisiveness in a society may also result from discrimination and historical conflicts more generally, and the existence of faith school may not play a crucial role in this respect given other arenas and actors (Roth 2007, Halstead 2009). Since the introduction of faith schools in Sweden was a side effect of a NPM reform, there was no explicit group that defended faith schools per se in their initial stages, and no systematic argumentations in favor of the schools were voiced in the public debate. Later on, given the establishment of the faith schools, various political parties brought forward arguments in favor and against them and their argumentations became more systematized and focused. The Green Party, for example, saw the acceptance of faith schools from a broader political picture where social, political and religious discrimination of minorities and immigrant groups had to be combated. The Christian Democrats also regard the support for religion in education as something desirable in general – especially since it affects the standing of Christianity in educational spheres and public debates.

Some of the arguments against Islamic denominational schools voiced in the public debates were also expressed during the interviews for the study which this article is based upon (Hertzberg 2011). Most of the interviewees voiced concern over the establishment and existence of Muslim independent schools, a limited number of them supported it. Some voices also expressed tolerance in a literal sense – the interviewees did not really see the point with the establishment of Islamic denominational schools, but they did not oppose it or advocate a shutting-down of these schools. The distribution of standpoints will be described below. As the article focus on lack of toleration of Islamic faith schools, the article foregrounds arguments against them, and their discursive context.

The article relies on qualitative data, above all interviews with 22 persons – nine teacher students, three teachers, three headmasters, two union representatives, two civil servants, one jurist, one imam and one representative of a political party. As additions to interviews, we have collected newspaper articles, memos from public authorities, bills introduced to the parliament, debates on commentary fields in web-edition of newspapers, et cetera. Being a small study, one may make some reservations concerning the reliability of our material; it is difficult to determine whether or not it is possible to make generalizations from our material, thus asserting that the viewpoints found in our material are overlapping with or similar to the attitudes of other teachers, headmasters et cetera. As it is a qualitative study, it does not aim for representativeness and reliability, but at describing and
analyzing an instance of “the meaning production” on Islam, religion and the politics of recognition at Swedish schools.

**Divisions, socio-economic segregation and exclusion**

As noted above, one of the most significant criticisms of denominational schools in debates across Europe is the claim that they are “divisive” (Short, 2002, 2003; Halstead & McLaughlin, 2005). It has been stated that Islamic denominational schools augment the social and ethnic segregation of the Swedish society. Students who attend to Islamic schools do not, according to this argument, experience the full diversity of the Swedish multicultural and multiethnic society, and hence runs the risk of not fully developing the competence to understand, manage and/or esteem this diversity. Other proponents of this argument claim that students in these schools may lack experience from and knowledge on dominant Swedish norms, standards and values. This argument touches upon the conflict between promoting ethnos or demos discussed above; the proponents repeat the equalizing and integrative objectives of the compulsory school project, thus partly sacrificing the goal of recognition given in strong programmes of multiculturalism (Roth 2001, Hertzberg 2011).

It has also been held that Muslim free schools are divisive in the sense that they separate recently arrived migrant Muslim children, and/or Muslim children whose parents belong to lower socio-economic strata, from children of more fortunate social backgrounds, thus denying them the possibility to enhance the value of their social capital. This argument is quite often employed in combination with the argument of equality, thus claiming that the allegedly poor quality of the education given at Islamic denominational schools increases the mixed ethnic and socio-economic segregation (Roth 2001).

According to Mark Halstead and Terence McLaughlin (2005: 63-65), the claim that faith schools are divisive can be understood in a number of ways, and they point out that it is necessary to identify the different interpretations of this argument. They find three clearly delineated arguments. The first is line of arguments objects to the fact that faith schools provide a distinctive education designed specifically for a distinctive category of students. This line of criticism is based on a truism, Halstead and McLaughlin argues, since the nature of faith school educational project demands categorisation and separation: students of Islamic faith with a preference for Islamic schooling are singled out and separated from the total body of students. The mere observation is not enough, Halstead and McLaughlin claim, and any substantial criticism of this separation “requires attention to specific intentions and consequences judged as negative or harmful” (ibid, 64).

The second line of arguments relates evident negative and/or harmful social phenomena as consequences of these acts of categorization and separation. It is held that denominational schools fail to bring students from different faith, social strata and/or cultures together at a formative stage of their developments; rather than promoting general interests and social coherence, these schools serve sectional interests. Among the harmful social phenomena, Halstead and McLaughlin thus find “the encapsulation of students in particular cultural traditions, the creation and reinforcement of social divisions [and] damage to social integration and harmony” (Ibid, 64). According to this argument, cultural and social disintegration follows from the establishment of faith schools. Since faith schools attract ethnic minorities and migrants, these schools may exacerbate the prejudice, exclusion and alienation which members of these groups experience.
Related to the second line of argument is a third one, which claims that faith schools develop beliefs and attitudes in their students which may be divisive in themselves. Being founded on a religious ontology, these sets of beliefs and attitudes may more often other sets sharply distinguish between right and wrong, thus furnishing a disposition to condemn certain lifestyles and choices as suboptimal or even unacceptable. Thus, it is held that these religiously motivated attitudes and beliefs may undermine the respect which is due to others with whom we disagree, in conflict with the demands of a liberal democratic society.

In our study, the argument of division was employed by several interviewees. In fact, one of the most common objections to the establishment of Islamic denominational schools was the argument that those schools have a number of negative effects on processes of social and/or ethnic integration. Peter, one of the teachers we met during this study, claimed that those schools set up a closed social setting, in which Muslim youth gets isolated from the surrounding society.

Peter: Muslim independent schools tend to maintain a quite closed social environment. There are a number of schools in Stockholm, and [...] I think that it is counterproductive, from an educational perspective, to create an environment which shields off the mainstream Swedish society. [...] There a number of negative consequences related to the fact that you permit religious believers to create a closed social context, or at least a relatively closed social context. Of course, I am aware of the fact that those schools do not at all resemble any straightforward Koran schools, I have learned that from colleagues that work in those schools and they are neither migrants nor Muslim believers. But the presence of those schools creates troubles, anxieties. I do not think that the linguistic environment is different from those in the nearby municipal school, or in regular independent school, [...] but what really makes me react is the excluding tendency ... if you set up a Muslim independent school, then you are quite explicit about which student you would like to have. The number of non-Muslims in those schools is close to zero, I suppose.

In the first part of the argument, Peter claims that the establishment of Muslim independent schools is counter-productive from a pedagogical point of view, since they “create an environment that shields off the mainstream Swedish society”. The learning of practices and discourses characteristic for the mainstream society is obstructed. Thus, the Muslim schools are not acknowledged as a provider of this knowledge. This argument is predicated on the assumption that these schools maintain a relatively close social environment. It is critical to denominational education in itself; it is premised on a negative perspective on religion: believers are, according to Peter, prone to establish closed social contexts. Islam, as other religions, is divisive in that sense. Secondly, Peter also claims that the presence of Muslim schools creates trouble and anxieties. The nature of these troubles and anxieties are not elaborated, though, neither any specification regarding the nature of this causality: in which way do Muslim independent schools create anxieties and troubles in their local surroundings?

In the third part of the argument, Peter echoes the first line of argument presented by Halstead and McLaughlin (above), based on the truism that separation causes division. He claims that the concentration of believers to specific denominational schools is in itself a matter of exclusion (of non-believers), and the fact that the interest for and admission to these schools are unevenly
distributed is regarded as a problem. Alice, one of the students at the teacher education, developed a similar argument, based on the thesis of segregation: “if they have their independent schools, and meet, and socialize, they become … segregated. It doesn’t matter if it is a Muslim independent school or a music school; you create your own marked off world. And their parents socialize”.

The argument against divisiveness was further employed by the two civil servants, Sylvia and Ibrahim, which was interviewed for this study. Rather than speaking in general terms, though, they referred to the conditions in the area in which they worked, an area in the northern part of Stockholm, among other things characterized by relatively high proportions of unemployed and foreign born, but with a low level of average income.

*Ibrahim*: The independent school reform has, among other things, got some individuals involved in processes which do not promote their own interest. We are talking about social networks: “you are my friend, I am your friend, you are my neighbour, I am a Muslim, you are a Muslim”, and so forth. Do you understand? Unforeseen consequences have emerged.

*Sylvia*: Exactly. There is no longer a free choice. It is not the family who choose, and not the child. There is someone else who says “you should go to this school”. And we have some objections to that, on this specific topic, we have some objections, because it is not of your their choosing. It’s like that. And maybe it is like that in other places as well, but then. Maybe, you are stronger; you can say … you can say “no”.

*Ibrahim*: And then, earlier, it just to be very mixed and diverse out here, even though the members from the majority population was quite few, but now, we see a concentration of a limited number of groups. And the possibility for our youth, for our adults, to mix up with the mainstream society, it does not longer exist.

In Ibrahim’s and Sylvia’s argument, the focus on social division is taken one step further. It is claimed that the establishment of independent Muslim schools is a part of a larger process, in which the influence of Muslim congregations on the everyday life in the community grow stronger. The agency of the residents is circumscribed, as their freedom to choose is restricted by local religious authorities. A distinct Muslim local community is developing. Moreover, Ibrahim is pessimistic what concerns the relations between the neighborhood and the surrounding society. As the social and cultural interface to the mainstream society decreases, the options for the inhabitants to “mix up” with it “no longer exist”. Thus, Ibrahim and Sylvia raise some strong objections to the existence of Muslim independent schools, but also to the influence of religious authorities in general. They make some further elaborations:

*Fredrik*: So, one family out of four put their children in a Muslim independent school?

*Ibrahim*: Yes, that’s the way it is. [...] And their picture of Stockholm, and of mainstream Swedish society, and of which we are, it is so limited, and it is built upon fantasies, rather than facts about us. Because of that, we have a responsibility to develop our citizens’ picture of the Swedish society.

*Sylvia*: Also, that problem is made worse if you stay only in a very limited area of Stockholm, if you never go downtown, if you just stick around out here … and if the school is located here, and the mosque, then you are stuck out here. You don’t go around in the Stockholm area; you don’t even have a local Stockholm identity.
Ibrahim: It is not a matter of total social isolation. They may have a job, they may be self-supporting, but their interface with the mainstream group is very limited. And there are so many myths about Swedishness that predominate, myths but not reality. Some of the positive, some negative, but in these hard times, the negative seems to predominate, and I think that this is the biggest problem for democracy, when people do not have an interface of their own, own experiences, but have to rely on myths.

In their argument, Ibrahim and Sylvia focus mainly on the cultural aspect of the segregating quality ascribed to Muslim independent schools. Ibrahim actually points out that some members of the Muslim community in his area might be adequately integrated economically, at least when it comes to their position on the labor market (“They may have a job, they may be self-supporting”), but still segregated culturally, in so far that their knowledge of the mainstream society is defective (“have to rely on myths”). Still, other interviewees did emphasize the social aspect of this divisive quality. Sarah, a senior official at the Swedish Teachers Union (STU, Lärarförbundet), was explicit in this matter. As an answer to my question about the segregating or counter-segregating qualities of Muslim denominational schools, she made her standpoint clear.

Sarah: Straight away, my opinion is that independent schools increase segregation. So it is. There is no other answer. The SNEA has proved that, a thousand of times. But then it is a matter of … who has the guts to stand up and say that the freedom of choice of schools should not exist? No one does that. So, you have to take the rough with the smooth, if you as a parent or a student want freedom of choice, that’s my opinion. And if you do not focus at the confessional/non-confessional-dimension … the gifted students with the powerful parents with the fat wallets choose one kind of schools, and the losers get stuck in totally different environment. Their results get worse, and the equivalence disappears. So it is.

Sarah focuses solely on the social aspect of the segregation argument. She does not consider the potentially integrative qualities of the Muslim denominational schools, and she does not mention the cultural aspect of segregation put forth by for example Peter and Ibrahim. Rather, she draws attention to a general pattern of socio-economic segregation, not caused by Muslim independent schools per se, but by the introduction of the voucher system, the freedom of choice and the establishment of independent schools, regardless of orientation. Thus, the Muslim denominational schools get inscribed in a general criticism of the changes in the educational system. In order to strengthen her argument, Sarah also refers to reports from SNEA; thus legitimating her argument with the scientific standard of those reports.

First of all, it is held against the establishment and/or existence of Islamic denominational schools that they increase the level of cultural segregation, in that they decreases the interface between Muslim students and the mainstream society, and hence screen off representations, norms and values from the mainstream society. As a distinctive, non-common educational environment, it is supposed to be divisive. Still, the objections are not primarily raised in defense of the cultural homogeneity of the Swedish society, or something akin; rather is depicted as a matter of education and freedom of choice. The learning of Swedish norms and values are halted, the freedom of choice is circumscribed. In so matter, it seems to be connected to the next topic, the argument of social divisiveness, and the desirability of social inclusion.
Although the objections to cultural segregation primarily are connected to the arguments against social segregation, it must be acknowledged that the reproduction of Demos (cf. Borevi 2002) in this context seems to be equal to the reproduction of majority Ethnos. The emphasis put on cultural segregation might suggest an ontology where cultural pluralism is seen as harmful, and where notions of cultural unity and homogeneity is heralded; as we know, these evaluations constitutes a cornerstone in nationalist ideology, and it might as well be said that the objections to Muslim schools also is informed by the kind of nationalism which Michael Billig (1995) refers to as every-day and “banal”.

Second of all it is held that Muslim independent schools augment socio-economical segregation. Peter’s argument targets Islamic faiths schools partly in its quality of being denominational (religious people are more prone to create closed social environments), partly in its quality of being Islamic (Islamic and Christian schools are frequently criticized than other denominational schools), and partly because they attracts many migrants who live in areas with a low number of native Swedes. Sarah’s argument targets Islamic schools mainly because their students mainly are recruited from relatively deprived social groups.

As a tentative conclusion, that the objections that we have encountered so far resonate with standpoints and representations explicated in Swedish educational policy, and most of all those that were articulated prior to the interventions of NPM and governance. This viewpoint is accentuated in the case of Sarah; her argument is premised on the assumption that social and ethnic differentiation is undesirable. One can discern an intertextual relation to this earlier paradigm in Swedish educational policy, where the principle of non-separation was heralded and differentiation was counteracted (Bunar 2002, Dahlstedt & Hertzberg 2010). Thus, the reproduction of Demos is given clearly precedence of the reproductions of Ethnos. Although we cannot leave the impact of a nationalist ontology out of account, the wish for social cohesion is primarily motivated by the counteracting of differentiation and stratification.

**Equivalence: quality, the rule of law and the rights of children**

Apart from the risk of social and cultural segregation, objections were also made to Islamic denominational schools concerning the quality of the education they offered. The quality was questioned, and so was the ability to reach the goals put forward in the national curricula and other steering documents. As noted above, this argument was often connected to the goal of equivalence, stipulated in the steering documents. Peter was one of the interviewees who expressed doubts in this particular issue, in relation to the quality of the instructions offered.

*Peter: Let me put it like this: if the systems of supervision is in function, and if the Swedish National Agency of Education, and until now Stockholm municipality ... if they can check up on whether the schools are law-abiding or not, then there should be no problems at all, but if you consider how the supervision of the independent schools has been, then ... it was like child’s play. The supervision did not function during the 90’s. The schools inspectorate haven’t been around for such a long time; the Stockholm municipality had some inspections of their own, but that was inspections of the pedagogical content, not about obedience to the law or steering document. Without a strong school inspectorate, with a clear authorization, then you run the risk of degenerated species, the building of false front, of Potemkin villages.*
Peter does not make his argument fully explicit. In a context where he talks about Islamic independent schools and the quality of education in school after the independent school reform, he notes that “degenerated species” – i.e. particular schools – will grow up, and that “Potemkin villages” will be set up. Although he does not explicitly claim that Islamic schools are species of degenerated kind, or fake fronts, this remain an implicit message: if the school inspectorate had been working in the way it should have, then Islamic denominational schools would “have some problems”. Their capacity to offer education by the standards is called into question.

The argument of quality was also put forward by David, teacher and a leading representative of the National Union of Teachers (NUT, sw. Lärarnas Riksförbund) when he outlined the general and official stance developed in the organization. He also connected into to the question of equivalence, and hence not only the quality of the instructions, but also the question of whether denominational independent schools really offered training or instructions in all comprehensive subjects or not, which apparently also is a part of the equivalence problem.

David: In general, we are critical to the development of the Swedish school during the last 20 years, and the independent schools are a part of this [...] we don’t make any difference between Muslim independent and Christian, but there is a risk connected to the independent school system, in so matter that the overall segregation increases. And the lack of equivalence is one crucial aspect of the segregation, but there are other aspects as well, for instance that you choose school in line with your religious beliefs. Still, whether you are Christian or a Muslim, you have to follow the rules. And we have been very explicit in that matter, it is of uttermost importance to follow the rules that governs the Swedish school system. And this is not always the case. And it has been shown on TV, documentaries that has exposed, Christian ... extremists, one might say ... Christian independent schools, and recently it has been exposed that there also exist Muslim independent schools in which you do not follow the rules. [...] We have taken a stand; the same rules should apply for municipal schools as well as for independent. And we think it is great that the School Inspectorate should inspect even more, in order to check the observance of the rules. There has been too much of ... lack of observance, we must say. There are examples of schools that do not care about the goals set up in the national syllabus, or in the national curricula. You don’t have teachings in sexuality and life together, or whatever that is censored. For us, it is a matter of lacking equivalence.

David makes some efforts to point out the general critique put forth by the union. It does not target Muslim denominational schools in particular, but also Christian; it does not target religious independent schools, but independent schools in general. He states that the establishment of independent schools in general has increased the social segregation, and that the question of equivalence is one crucial aspect of the segregation problem. Religious independent schools, Christian as well as Muslim, do not meet the standards pointed out in the steering documents David claims, and there is a general problem with lack of observance of the steering documents among denominational schools, in so much that they do not deliver all the instructions that are specified in the national syllabus.

Thus, when Peter focus the alleged lack of quality, David pinpoints the lack of observance to the national syllabus. He clearly points out that the lack of observance is a problem in itself. Rules and
steering documents must be followed, that is their raison d’être. But the argument of equivalence is also framed within the argument of segregation. The lack of equivalence is regarded as a problem in itself, but also because it is said to nurture segregation. Schools that do not provide instructions in all subjects, and in which the quality of the instructions is lacking, do not prepare the students for life after school in a proper way, and this deficiency is even more apparent since the students in Muslim independent schools often belong to socially underprivileged strata, and live in deprived and stigmatized areas. Here, the notion of equivalence is connected to instructions as well as outcome. As noted above, this plurality of meaning is not specific for this context; rather, it is a distinct feature of the ways in which education and social inclusion is elaborated in Swedish educational policy (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002, Englund 2006).

As noted in the introductory section, it was originally related to the ethos of equality prominent in educational policy during the 1960’s and 70’s. Still, when the social ambitions of the educational system become more diffuse during the 1990’s, the goal of equivalence maintained its strong position (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002), as it was displaced (Englund 2006) and reframed. In its new interpretation, the goal of equivalence became a keyword in the endeavors to control the outcomes/products from public as well as private suppliers of education, assuring that the same standard of education was provided throughout the country. Thus, the plurality of meaning attached to the concept of equivalence expressed in our material resonates with the usage in contemporary educational policy. It bridges the claims for accountability with equalizing ambitions; one single term encapsulates two strong arguments against Muslim independent schools.

In the interview with Sarah, senior representative at the STU, the Swedish Teachers Union, the connection between abidance by the rules and the dangers of social segregation got explicated in a manifest way. The first time the STU, Sarah’s employer, acknowledged that confessional free schools has become an issue is in 1994, when the new national curricula was implemented. In there, it was stated that the independent schools could be organized as confessional, but that the publicly financed municipality schools had to be non-confessional. The national curricula for the different school forms differed in this matter, and, according to Sarah, a huge number of teachers and members of the union opposed this. They thought that all schools should be non-confessional, and the STU made a number of statements pointing in that direction.

New debates followed at the turn of the century, prompted by a redraft in the laws and decrees that regulates the national school system, Sarah continues, and since then one of the key issues has been whether the regulations - and hence conditions - for the public and privates schools should be identical or not. According to Sarah, the prevalence of schools not guided by a secular and general national curriculum has been met by apparent disapproval from numerous union-organized teachers. There seems to be a strong opposition against independent schools, and against denominational schools, but not specifically against Muslim independent schools. The objections against Muslim – and other denominational – schools is based on a premise of equivalence; the Swedish school system should be comprehensive, and the education delivered within in that system should not deviate too much from the secular norm.

So far, Sarah’s call for equivalence is mainly a call for abidance by the law and a general rule system, in which the rules apply for everyone, without deviations. But her argument also took the risk of segregation or social division into consideration. In this matter, she argued quite forcefully (above).
She does not pay any attention to the potentially counter-divisive potential of Islamic denominational schools. The focus is solely on socio-economic conditions, and the main effects are considered to be negative; socio-economic segregation is said to follow from the independent school system and the right to choose type of school, and the establishment of Muslim denominational schools do not change that. Moreover, there is yet another interpretation of equivalence that is articulated in her argument.

Sarah: And then there is another aspect, I can make another contribution. [...] I had a reason to check it out, why confessional schools are allowed in Sweden, why they do exist at all [...]. And I got the task to start digging, and I found a resolution from the UN and all sorts of things. Really, it is based on, if I got it right, and if I haven’t forgot anything, it is based on the right of the parents to teach your own child. And that is some kind of protection for … minorities […]. We ratified it in the fifties or in the sixties. [...] But here, in Sweden, we created as school where the children, well, where it is possible to choose a path different from the parents. That’s why we have a subject called “religion”, not Christianity. So, if you should position the STU in this debate, it could be said that we think that the child has the right to choose her or his own path, and it might very well be totally different from the parent’s path. If so, you have to create a school which allows you to choose that different path. But then, it should not be possible for parents to teach their own children, of course. Fredrik: One of the main tenets behind the comprehensive school? Sarah: Yes, very much so. Equivalence, yes; we don’t lose sight of that guiding star, which is the inviolable right of the child to choose its own path.

In this part of the interview discourse, Sarah makes a clear connection between the goal of equivalence and the – presumably universal - rights of the child. Here, the goal of equivalence is less connected to abidance by the rules, but rather depicted as a “guiding star” which directs the attention to the universal rights of the child. It conjures up a discourse of human rights, rather than attention to abidance by the rules. The goal of equivalence is not justified pragmatically, but because it follows from attention paid to universal rights. The reference is quite vague, but Sarah’s phrasing suggests that she refers to article 14 in the United Nations declaration of the Right of the Child, which proclaims the right to freedom of religion. Obviously, she emphasizes the right to freedom from religion of the child, rather than the right to freedom to religion. Thereby, the plurality of meanings is reduced; one possible interpretation is favored and the others are concealed. At the same time, the meaning of the term “equality” is pushed towards the interpretations found in earlier educational policy, where the equalizing and integrative ambitions of the compulsory school project were spelled out. However, the ambition to facilitate for the choosing of one’s own path, regardless of history and background, does not only encompass the reduction of the effects from socio-economic stratification and social injustice, but also diminishing the cultural and religious influences of the parental generation.

Concluding discussion
To sum up: a number of disadvantages with the establishment of Islamic denominational schools have been expressed here. They are held to be divisive, both culturally and socially, and the quality of their instructions is supposed to be inadequate, in relation to the standards explicated in the national curriculum and syllabi. Still, few calls for shutting down of these schools are voiced. It seems that the
Muslim denominational schools are tolerated in a literal sense: it is accepted, sometimes out of pragmatically motivated considerations, but not liked. It could be said that the provision of a juridical and institutional space for religious minorities to establish denominational schools is a part of the politics of recognition; i.e. an educational policy which, under auspicious circumstances might provide the means for religious minorities to receive respect as equal and gain admission as normal. Still, we also know that the establishment of Muslim independent schools has not followed from any programmatic policy of recognition, but as a “side-effect” to the implementation of NPM in the governing of education.

Some of the objections to the existence of denominational schools that we have met here implicitly and explicitly related to the notion of equivalence, which is a keyword in Swedish educational policy. It signifies on the one hand a demand for abidance by the national curriculum and syllabi, and on the other its priority over freedom of choice, and also the priority of “demos” over “ethnos”. The stress on equivalence consists of two distinct although related arguments. On the one hand, there is a demand for abidance by the law (here: steering documents such as national curriculum and syllabi), which among other things are paid attention to because Islamic schools are suspected not follow these steering documents accordingly. This interpretation of “equivalence” is related to an understanding of the term which has become more and more frequent since the introduction of freedom of choice and independent schools in Swedish educational policy, and the decentralized system of governance of education in Sweden (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002). In this context, where regulation is obtained through management by objective and evaluation, and responsibilities are spread between numerous responsible organizations, the goal of equivalence is equivalent (!) to abidance by the law.

On the other hand, there is a wish to maintain socially integrated educational environments, in which students from different ethnicities, classes and gender meets and interacts. Thus, it seems like the equalizing and integrative objectives which were central to the compulsory school project implemented during the heyday of the Scandinavian welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990) seem to be “alive and kicking”. But the quest for recognition of minority beliefs systems, central to the policy of multiculturalism, is circumscribed. In so far, the arguments employed here gives priority to the reproduction of “demos” over the reproduction of “ethnos”. It must also be noted that the freedom of choice, an important feature in the neoliberal turn of educational policy, does not seems to be so important for the interviewees in this particular matter.

As noted in the introduction, the goal of “equivalence” denotes a political compromise, in so that it expresses an idea of equality and fairness in a context where freedom of choice also is a recognized and highly estimated value. Abidance by the steering documents guarantees the equality of opportunity, a thin concept of social justice, as the national curricula states that the education which is at disposal in the national school system should be of equal quality and accessibility to everyone.

In this article, we have emphasized the connection between on the one hand the attitudes to Islamic denominational schools, and on the other contemporary and anterior education policy in Sweden, above all the idea of equivalence in education. As such, we focus on a specifically Swedish discourse (albeit the ideas of equality and abidance by the law evidently not are exclusively Swedish). Still, it could reasonably be argued that not only national, but also transnational discourses affect what is expressed locally. The influence of specific transnational discourses, such as e.g. those labelled
islamophobic (Gardell 2010), orientalistic (Said 1978) or racializing (Zebiri 2008) might also be at play, mixed together with or distinctly separated from discourses of secularism or competing religions; the latter might of course also be articulated without any influence what so ever from the earlier. Nevertheless, the analytic task to discern the influence of islamophobic, orientalistic or racializing discourses in our material would call for a more elaborated (and suspicious) hermeneutic than the one employed here. This is not all to say, though, that we find those hermeneutic enterprises unnecessary. Rather, on the contrary.