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Is gender neutrality a post-human phenomenon? The concept of 'gender neutral' in Swedish education

ABSTRACT. Inspired by the feminist thoughts of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, the author of this article endeavours to depict the emerging concept of gender neutrality that has developed in Sweden in recent years. The author uses an interpretative paradigm with a variety of qualitative field research tools, to gain a deeper understanding of how gender neutrality works in practice at school and nursery level in Sweden. The study took place in Stockholm in September 2014 with the author living in situ. The case study involved the use of: field notes and observations, interviews with university scholars, heads of schools and nurseries and open-ended questionnaires with teachers, carers and students. The analysis of written resources included the school and nursery national curriculum, press discourse and scientific publications on the subject matter. The author of the article argues that gender neutrality may be perceived as a concept originating from post-humanism, therefore it should be examined within the post-human socio-pedagogical reflection and embedded in norm critical discourse.

KEYWORDS: post-humanism, gender neutral, equality, education, norm critical pedagogy, modernity

Introduction to a post-human conceptualization

With the extraordinary acceleration of technological advancement, globalisation and new, unprecedented social phenomenon, traditional humanism struggles to frame global reality. These factors evoke a new way of looking at humans, their fate and their social conditioning. With the deployment of a number of ideas with the prefix *post* (e.g. post-structuralism, postmodernism, post-realism, post-secularism) eventually the term 'post-human' was also constructed (e.g. Fukuyama, 2002). Post-humanism sought to de-centralise 'Man', who was for centuries at the heart of humanist thought, questioning traditional social norms and hierarchies, thus giving man a much more humble place amongst other

species. Human is no longer separate from other forms of life and certainly not dominant. Human and other life forms are interwoven due to evolution and the ongoing exchanges of material and immaterial data across different species, demonstrated by similarities in their genetic code, amalgamating ontologically different elements and categories into a dynamic hybrid (Jöns, 2006, p. 572). The humanistic idea of a 'Man' as a representation of the human kind, was an exclusionary category on many other levels. For instance it was a masculine normality that defined what is a 'mankind', not to mention the accompanying taxonomy of exclusionary model, where a human mould is white, heterosexual, able-bodied, healthy, young and also middle class. Even the semiotics of humanist thought suggest that the superiority of the male genome over other coexisting genders due to their patriarchal historicity. Post-humanism denotes the interdependence of the 'human' and other species and the increasing relationship with and dependence of humans on technology. Post-humanism rejects dualism of nature and culture, focusing on the autopoietic force of all living organisms (Braidotti, 2013, p. 3). It blurs the boundaries between categories; technology (e.g. artificial intelligence), the cosmos, inanimate objects and living organisms thus the categories overlap and interact. Some call it pan-humanity (Franklin et al., 2000, p. 26), thinking that these previously separate categories are interconnected only through a sense of vulnerability and fear and are kept in place by violence and threat of rejection. This is not how R. Braidotti (2013, p. 15) perceives post-human thought. In her view, it is more egalitarian than traditional humanism, and she accuses it of racism, sexism, classism and eurocentrism, that enables imperial thinkers to create categories of 'otherness' to discriminate against, what she calls: 'disposable bodies' who do not fit in with the ideals created by the humanist philosophers.

Although post-humanism is present, at least on the declarative level amongst many feminist writers, Braidotti (2013, pp. 20-25) questions their measuring of what is classed as 'female' by the use of universal standards that are therefore tainted with Western culture and traditional humanism, with accentuated politics of whiteness. Post-humanism does not equate with the 'death of mankind' (early anti-humanism of 1970-ties; see: Schaeffer, 1970; Sartre, 1973; and Soper, 1992). Post-humanism relies on the deconstruction (see: Derrida, 2001) of normativity and politics of inclusion based on the rationalizing and normalising of diversity. There is however an undeniable heritage of

humanism that enabled the birth of post-humanism, visible in the cult of individuality, autonomy, personal freedom and responsibility (Todorov, 2002). These values inevitably promote secularism. Nevertheless they resonate in post-humanist thought, although they are not considered universally superior to other forms of togetherness and social coexistence. It is through emancipation and equality—enabled by humanism—that new ideas such as anti-subjectivity (introduced by Bruno Latour’s anti-epistemology (1993) and affirmative stand of post-human condition (Braidotti, 2013) were able to emerge, so one may deduce that post-humanism is an advanced form of humanism. A good example of a post-human condition is the use of advanced technology by the music industry, to enable the creation of new music celebrities. A person with an average musical predisposition, average music hearing and average intonation, can sound immaculate and captivating due to extensive use of Auto-Tune, Pro Tools and other mixing and mastering software. Without the use of IT, this person would not be able to become a star, therefore binding the human and the technological into one within the final product of the post-human music industry. The same person’s image, shape, skin condition, hair or even eye colour can be easily altered by the use of Photoshop and similar products. The difference between what we can hear and see and the original human specimen may be immense. Unlike in the humanist era, the ‘star’ can not be created without technological aids, exposing post-human dependency on advanced technology. Post-human does not eliminate the human element, it is neither anti-human nor inhumane, it simply widens the spectrum of interdependency between the technological innovations created by humans and the de-construction and re-creation of yet another human with the use of such technologies. This self-perpetuating mechanism of post-human creation spins at high velocity taking the human race into an exciting but uncertain new level of human-machine relationship. In the techno-deterministic view, ‘project: human’ is not yet final and complete. A more advanced human form is yet to be developed thanks to the enhancement of bodies and of human intelligence by the use of technology (Bostrom & Roache, 2007). Amongst many demarcation lines of traditional humanism, the human body possess a biological sex and a socially assigned gender. Machines however are free of such differences unless scientists creating them choose to assign gender to them (mainly in the linguistic sense—by giving them a gendered name). The development of

these thoughts led to some neo-feminist thinkers being drawn to the idea of a gender free society.

Perhaps it was Donna Haraway (1985, 1990), who first sought liberation from duality of body and gender in the creation of a post-gender cyborg. However such a creation relied fully on the technology which was unavoidably rooted in patriarchal historicity. In her pursuit of a cyborg utopism that liberates interactions from restrictions of gender, Haraway (1985, 1990, 1992, 2003, 2006) affirms new relationships between living organisms and technology, shadowing human ontology with a new post-human cyborg ontology. The connections between embodiment, technology and gender, were also present in works of Braddott (2002, 1996), Springer (1994) and Balsamo (1988), representing a feminist angle when looking at power hierarchies that would still persist in the post-human cyborg utopia. This stands in opposition to Haraway's claims of discarded 'coherent and masterful subjectivity' of cyborgs, who represent a fusion of organic and non organic mater that paradoxically bring them closer to nature than a traditional self-centred human could ever become (Haraway, 1992, p. 87). The utopian idea of cyborgs that are meant to be in essence, improved 'humans' is an expression of trans-human trend within post-human thought. It relies hugely on science-fiction, futuristic visions of improved human qualities, elimination of genetic faults, self-regeneration and the extended power of human potential thanks to advanced, yet to be discovered technologies. In this stream of post-humanism, the use of technology is primarily subservient to human, to enable humans to remain a master species, to explore the full unrealised potential of human brains and advance human skills, powers, health and life-span. Some of it is already happening in the deepening analysis of human DNA, cell modification, organ transplants, artificial limbs, cosmetic surgery and the use of IT equipment that counters human error and monitors and corrects human behaviour (e.g. in aviation, military service or medicine).

Haraway (1990, p. 150) believes that 'the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world'. At the same time she claims that we are already becoming cyborgs (eadem). What is puzzling for Haraway's readers is that in some places she acknowledges that even cyborg bodies (like human ones) are 'maps of power and identity' (Haraway, 1990, p. 180). Is it not a contradiction? Perhaps Haraway meant (similar to Balsamo, 1996) that cyborgs are a hope for escaping gender stereotypes. When Claudia Springer thought that the cyborg concept might have been yet another

expression of rebellion against what is inadequate or unjust in human life (1996), Braidotti (2002) thought that cyborgs would not dispose of 'otherness', whether it is based on sexuality or other qualities. Trans-humanism in contrary to mainstream post-humanism maintains the human/animal divide, making humanity separate and self-contained, reproducing exclusionary categories of classical humanist thought. Braidotti (2013, p. 97) argues in her later work that technological apparatus may be freed of sex and race, whilst its naturalisation will be an expression of hybridity and interconnectivity, which would lead to creation of a self-organising, transgender mechanism/organism. This organism would make transsexuality a desired norm in a post-human world, relocating the body of a human somewhere else. Would it create new forms of exclusion that it was meant to combat?

Nevertheless, one may choose to believe that Donna Haraway is one of the first futuristic feminist writers that materialised a post-gender world through the creation of cyborgs. The question emerges: Is gender neutral a post-gender idea that can be situated amongst post-human thought? Does gender neutrality remove sexual difference or is it an egalitarian utopia that attempts to introduce a certain 'gender blindness' in post-human relations? Further discussion will lead to finding the answers. The author will use examples of the Swedish take on gender neutrality, explored through an in-depth study into educational developments that have taken place in Sweden in the last few years.

A few words on norm critical pedagogy

With the pledge to frame 'gender neutrality' through the optics of post-humanism, comes an unavoidable turn towards norm critical pedagogy. Post-humanism in its essence questions what is known as a human norm and looks for multiple alternatives. Normative subjectivity, dividing different forms of life into: plants, animals, human, alien, cadaver, machine, comes under the scrutiny of post-humanist thinkers. Although R. Braidotti (2013, p. 49) claims to reject the individualism and relativism that shape vital characteristics of norm critical disposition in post-human subjectivity, her conceptualisation of multiple belongings and the nomadic nature of post-human subjects, fit within the politics of inclusion and interconnectivity, that are grounded in the norm critical framework. Both post-human and norm critical theories question the

nature and existence of social norms. They both tend to reveal and oppose the mechanisms of power distribution and exclusion in the making of norms and therefore create deep divisions under the premise of normativity. Both long to fight exclusion and injustice. Post-human philosophy goes beyond inter-human relations and cultural norms, towards closer and more intimate relations between human-bios (understood as active and creative life-forms), human-zoe (understood as a 'passive' biological embodiment of organic life) and human-advanced technology or even human-artificial intelligence. The boundaries created by human norms in the post-human realm cease to exist, crossing the lines between 'the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 89). What draws the norm critical towards post-human pedagogical reflection, is the desire to break the cycle of repetitive reproduction of familiar systems of thought and behaviour, actively reinventing subjectivity 'as a set of mutant values' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 93). In her earlier work, Braidotti (2006) talks about post-human politics that can be summed up as an affirmation of interdependence of the human species, the non-human others and the personal and a-personal life. Norms create order and the complete freedom from norms may lead to chaos. Nevertheless existing norms are inherently discriminatory towards these who do not fulfil normative criteria. This generates an underclass within human species of what Braidotti brutally labelled 'disposable bodies' who have limited access to protection, medication, vaccinations, refuge and so on (Braidotti, 2013 p. 117, 127). According to Braidotti (2013, p. 98), 'sexualised, racialized or even naturalized differences, ... have become unhinged and act as the forces leading to the elaboration of alternative modes of transversal subjectivity, which extend not only beyond gender and race, but also beyond the human.'

Norm critical pedagogy challenges the structures of 'otherness' and is far from being complete and definitive. It is, similarly to post-human pedagogy, a phenomenon that 'becomes'. It is performative in the process of making, which is active and therefore in constant movement, flexible, fuzzy and changeable. Although it has its roots in queer theory movements (Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2014), due to the challenge of heteronorm, it goes far beyond queer or even gender theories. It becomes a holistic pedagogical approach to life, power structures and social world, with the focus on the norms that control the public and individual perception of what is classed as normal vs.

abnormal. Norm critical pedagogy combines emancipatory pedagogies and their critique of power with a new way of understanding post-human identity and gender, as a product of multiple oppressive social practices that create exclusionism such as sexism, racism, homophobia or classism. Norm critical pedagogy addresses these forms of power structure by unveiling and questioning norms that created them and continually legitimize them. Norm critical pedagogy hopes to create ways to escape 'branding', 'labelling' and assigning value based on one's gender and sexuality. Gilles Deleuze engaged with the idea of freeing 'human embodiment from its indexation on socialized productivity to become bodies without organs' (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 91-92). Is this what feminist and queer movements in Sweden seek to achieve through 'gender neutral' policy?

A 'gender neutral' human or a gender free attitude towards a 'gendered' human?

Scandinavia is well renowned internationally for gender equality. The Gender Gap Index brings Scandinavian countries to the top table (The global gender gap report 2014). When it comes to gender neutrality, some practices—e.g. the use of a gender neutral pronoun *hän*—existed in Finland for centuries, but its Swedish equivalent *hen* was introduced into Swedish language in 2011, on the wave of a more embracing view of sexuality and when the norm critical approach in Swedish pedagogy extended into political and social life. One may say that gender neutrality in education has recently become Sweden's number one export product (Nyström, 2010). Multiple Nordic countries are following the developments in Sweden, through official networks such as the Nordic Gender Institute and "Norden"—The Nordic Cooperation of Ministers for Gender Equality (Nyström, 2010) and Lithuania is one of the first countries that has decided to implement the Swedish gender neutrality model (Blomberg et al., 2014). It is important to explore the true meaning of gender neutrality, how is it understood and how it is put into practice in Sweden (Francis, 2010; Engdahl 2011; Aikman & Unterhalter 2007).

The following discussion on what gender neutrality is in practice for Swedish teachers and scholars is based on an in-depth study of the national school curriculum and a month long field research carried out in

Stockholm in the Autumn 2014. The research tools, captured in table 1, comprised primarily of semi-structured interviews with scholars from Stockholm University (SU) and heads of two schools and two nurseries based in Stockholm area, and short-term, non-participant observation in these four facilities.

Table 1.

<p>Analysis of official documents e.g. Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 98 Revised 2010.</p> <p>Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre 2011.</p> <p>Curriculum for the upper secondary school 2011.</p>	<p>Interviews with the SU scholars¹ involved in gender neutral discourse, research in that matter and preparation of students. (N 9)</p> <p>Interviews with heads of two small nurseries in Stockholm's middle class area: one private, one governmental + non-participant observations</p>	<p>Questionnaires—Swedish sample—school teachers and nursery teachers, already working in school/nursery environment, participating in post-diploma or specialization course at the SU (N21+N20)</p>
<p>Analysis of existing scientific literature</p>	<p>Interviews with heads of two large (400 and a 1000 pupils), multiethnic public schools in Stockholm area + non-participant observations</p>	<p>Questionnaires—International sample—foreign students of final years of MA courses—part of ERASMUS exchange programmes at the SU (N18)</p>

Source: AOC

The identities of some of the interviewees will be withheld to respect their wish to remain anonymous. Educational facilities will also not be named.² The interviews were enriched by analysis of fully anonymous, open-question survey carried out amongst students of Stockholm University on advanced teacher courses, who were already employed as

¹ Unfortunately, author was unable to carry out an interview with Klara Dolk or Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, who are also key researchers in this field. See e.g.: Dolk, 2009; Lenz Taguchi, 2011.

² These can be obtained at author's discretion after prior authorisation by participants in question.

school and nursery professionals. A 'control group' of questionnaire respondents was formed from foreign ERASMUS exchange students of the final years of MA teacher courses. The interviews and questionnaires were completed in English, which was the common second language for both the researcher and the respondents. This might have had some minor effect on accuracy and the level of sophistication of the linguistics used. However, due to a significant numbers of participants, these issues should be considered marginal. There is also a significant number of research works in English language on the subject matter, that for practical reasons were given priority, however Swedish texts were not excluded.

The concept of gender neutrality has its root in post-constructivist feminism, in norm critical pedagogy and in the principle of equality for all. It can be considered a certain 'gender blindness' policy, that implies treating everyone the same despite their gender. Making neither preferences nor assumptions about gender roles or gender norms is the essence of this policy. Gender neutrality challenges the idea of two opposite species: men and women, separated by an invisible wall. Gender neutrality admits there are differences between men and women but these differences exist on a scale and not as two bipolar extremes. The implication is that despite differences, all genders should respect each other, cooperate, try to see things through the other person's perspective and not create artificial separate universes reserved for only one gender type. Gender neutrality challenges stereotyping of any kind, to open people's minds to a wide range of gender and personal predispositions that may not be coherent with traditional views of gender roles or gender features. It is focused on self-awareness and analyzing how gender may influence one's behaviour, relations and dynamics, in the classroom and in society as a whole. When this initial norm critical awareness is gained it becomes easier to realize when one acts differently towards people based on their gender.

The Swedish National Agency for Education, Skolverket,³ is the central administrative authority for the public school system, including publicly organised pre-schooling, school-age childcare and the education of adults. It issues, amongst other guidelines, the national school curriculum, the pre-school curriculum and supporting materials for teachers. Skolverket shapes the operations of schools in Sweden and therefore it is vital to study its official documents in pursuance of gender neutrality

³ www.skolverket.se

taxonomy. It is not surprising that 'gender equality,' 'diversity,' 'gender' and 'equality' are used frequently in all of the documents. The term 'boys/girls' is used only once within the whole 200 page compulsory school curriculum. The word 'gender' was used on 20 pages, always in the context of equal treatment and anti-discrimination practices. For instance one may read that:

No one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of *gender*,⁴ ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, *transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation*, age or functional impairment Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures (Curriculum for the compulsory school... 2011, p. 9).

The Preschool curriculum states:

...counteract traditional gender patterns and sex roles. Girls and boys shall have in the pre-school the same possibilities to test and develop capacities and interests *without limitation by stereotypical sex roles...* (Curriculum for the Preschool 2011, p. 5).

The school has a responsibility to *counteract traditional gender patterns*. It should thus provide scope for pupils to explore and develop their ability and their interests *independently of gender affiliation...* (Curriculum for the Preschool 2011, p. 10).

These documents and their contents on gender equality in many ways reflect the norm critical approach and the neutrality of attitude towards gender. They send a strong message to teachers and head teachers about the direction in which gender should be approached in teaching practice and this resonates strongly in the answers from the questionnaires and the interviews.

What is important to note, gender neutrality is not an attempt to remove gender from people. This, outside of a utopian cyborg, world would be impossible. According to the interviewees, (whose idea of neutrality turned out to be uniform) neutrality means equal treatment of people regardless of their gender. Neutrality also means realizing the differences and what implications they may have for the life opportunities of individuals and for any interaction between social actors. By realizing one's own limitations and one's own gender bias, one may be able to adjust towards a more egalitarian model of relations with others.

⁴ Some words are underlined to put emphasis (author), it is not underlined in the original document.

Gender neutrality is primarily about fairness and equality to all despite their background. It is a part of wider societal change that is meant to reveal the mechanisms of social injustice and to help with implementation of true equality in education and beyond. This can be achieved when all children are treated in the same manner, so they do not feel inferior, superior, less important or more important than others at any time. They should get the same attention and the same space and time in the classroom environment. Academics with teaching practice at schools and nurseries stated, that the teacher is not meant to create an artificial wonderland of an ideal world with no poverty, no addiction, no illness, no class division, no ethnicity or gender. The teacher is there to open children's minds to the world of diversity, to show how the existing hierarchies in society are created and maintained. At the same time the teacher has a mission to install respect and trust in all people regardless of their demographics and to show that we are all one race—a human race, regardless of our skin colour, our gender or our economic situation. Only in such reflexive environment can children achieve the true equality of opportunity. Gender neutrality allows people, despite their gender, to act more masculine or more feminine, depending on the context and the situation, so that they do not feel awkward taking on a more feminine or masculine task or role. Fear of negative judgment disappears creating an atmosphere that allows people to use their full potential and to accommodate how they want to act in different social settings, without feeling uncomfortable or at risk of ridicule. This should give children greater confidence in themselves and a healthy self-esteem, which may prevent multiple social and psychological traumas. Gender neutrality is therefore healthy for a well functioning, equal society and for people's mental health. According to both academics and the heads of educational facilities, this means that there is no embarrassment to face if a boy cries or if a girl has an angry outburst, because they are both human and experience a range of the same emotions. A father should not be viewed as less manly if he plays on the floor with his children in an affectionate and loving manner. A woman should not be viewed as more manly if she handles professional situations in a masculine way, which is deemed as cold and rational, giving her a 'hard as nails' reputation. We should all feel comfortable using a range of masculine and feminine tools, behaviours and emotions that are interchangeable depending on the setting and the circumstances. It is necessary for good functioning in society that people can switch between the roles and between gender specific

behaviours. We all can be more masculine or feminine despite our gender and our gender should not limit us in achieving our personal goals at home, at school and at work. Summing up, gender neutrality allows someone to be the person they feel most comfortable with and be happy and fulfilled, without being limited or frowned upon. It allows people to be their actual selves, freeing them from what may be seen as an oppressive culture of gender stereotyping.

The relativism present in the gender neutrality discourse, leads school and nursery practitioners to pose self-challenging questions. How far do I, as a teacher, want to go with this idea? What do I want to achieve? Will it prepare a child for the reality of the outside world or will it create an artificial, experimental space within the educational environment? The best option is to widen children's perspective and make them aware of the gender implications in life and not falsify the gender picture, but to equip them with sensitivity to notice good and bad practice, to oppose discrimination and to always be as fair as possible in their own decisions and judgments.

Looking at the practicalities of how this neutrality may be achieved in the classroom, it is worth noting a new experimental technique, used in approximately 400 facilities across Sweden, of self-documentation by teachers and head teachers. They document by video, pictures and notes how they interact with children in an effort to distinguish their own bias. The process of documentation involves the children, who are encouraged to take photos and videos themselves. Both the professionals involved and the children analyse the materials collected, discussing how gender bias might have effected some of the behaviours seen in everyday life situations and to scrutinise the actions of education practitioners. This is both revealing and therapeutic. This provokes higher levels of reflexivity when interacting with children. According to Dr. Christian Eidevald,⁵ who is involved in this project in nurseries, both head teachers and teachers are often shocked when viewing their 'in class' behaviour, when they suddenly see how their own behaviour differs depending on the gender of the pupils. Dr. Eidevald looks at pre-school from a structural feminism perspective. He analyses the dominant discourse through the lens of gender pedagogy. As a practitioner and a researcher he has a unique opportunity to engage with hundreds of pre-school

⁵ Dr Eidevald is a nursery teacher, a lecturer and a post-doctoral researcher of gender in education. Some of his works include: Eidevald, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Eidevald & Lenz Taguchi, 2011.

teachers across Sweden. Whilst championing the programme, he also warns that limiting teachers and children by the norm of neutrality may also have some negative effects as it creates artificial boundaries and brings in new, quite narrow norms; the exact opposite of what is wanted. Practical examples of attempted neutrality quoted by Dr. Eidevald are: removing gender specific such as cars and dolls, not using gender stereotyping words like brave, tall, victorious and strong, trying to make the environment and games gender neutral. Toy animals that do not represent any particular sex are allowed as are building bricks. 'He' and 'she' are replaced by the third person neutral pronoun 'hen', games must be inclusive and compensatory pedagogy is used to encourage the use of gender specific words in reverse to the gender that they traditionally apply to i.e. 'you are so brave and strong Vanessa', 'you are so caring and forgiving Johannes'. Instead of saying 'what a pretty dress, you look beautiful' teachers should use neutral adjectives, like: 'oh I see you have a new dress, it looks very warm (or it looks very comfortable)'. Another interviewee Elis Storesund (nursery teacher and lecturer at SU), runs special courses organised by municipal authorities, to enhance the self-reflexivity of teachers on how gender influences human interaction and to encourage positive change. She believes that there is no one single way to achieve greater neutrality in the classroom and that each teacher must create their own way of doing it. She also uses a documentation technique, similar to the one described above, to allow teachers to see if they display different expectations based on gender. It is interesting that she noticed that children can express resistance to compensatory pedagogy. They may not follow what the teacher wants them to do and she believes that they should be allowed to do that. Children need to know what the norms are and why they exist. They need to understand that the norms are relative and not only that they help you operate in social space, but also that they are a form of restriction. Children need to be aware of power relations and they themselves also use power by silent resistance, passive resistance, lack of cooperation, tears, screams and anger. Another SU post-doctoral researcher, Dr. Anna Palmer (2011) discussed how children often say and do things to please the teacher. Whilst it is clear that the children are attempting to fulfil the teacher's expectations of them, she was conscious that making children do or say something that they do not feel sure about would be a negative practice. She was the only interviewee that said that in her view one can never be gender neutral in their actions. However, this does not mean that there

is little to achieve in gaining greater gender equality. Dr. Palmer's work concentrates on breaking the limitations on how mathematics is taught in Swedish schools, which in her view leads to the restriction or self-restriction of pursuing maths related subjects by girls after secondary school. Dr. Palmer is trying to connect art, music, dance, body and more feminine subjects with maths to break the barriers of gender in this field. She also mentioned the pedagogical documentation as a form of scrutiny of teacher's gender bias.

Dr. Kajsa Ohlrlander and Dr. Janne Bromseth, from the Gender Studies Department of SU, pursued a norm critical pedagogy approach, where binaries of gender are undermined and all differences are placed on a scale, rather than as opposites. This creates a completely new approach to gender, different to the one of compensatory pedagogy, which tends to simply switch the traditional gender roles around. Achieving gender neutrality is much more complex. It is based on a judgement free approach, enabled by the relativism and flexibility of 'so-called norms.' The managers of nurseries who were interviewed, have been aware of Skolverket's requirements and declared great interest and enthusiasm for the idea of gender neutrality. They revealed some practices used in their facilities to initiate a process of change towards this ideal. Amongst the examples given were: selecting books that do not contain gender stereotypes, replacing male names with female names in traditional children's stories; using 'hen' for characters in stories so that children can imagine their gender as they wish; rather than using mum and dad on contact tags, 'parents' or the parents' names are used instead; using gender free dolls; using gender free animals; animating games where traditional relations are not used and having days where all children, despite their gender, dress as fire-fighters, flamenco dancers, nurses or football players etc. They use neutral, value free adjectives and don't use items that are coloured in a gender specific manner. Days are organised where parents come and talk about their professions and home relations, some being heterosexual, some single, some transgender or in a same-sex relationship. Country specific, culture festivals are held to celebrate diversity. They were very positive about experimental pre-schools such as EGALIA and felt that they set a positive model for other facilities. However, they were aware that the level of parental cooperation and support in pursuance of equality and gender neutrality might be different in other areas of the country or even Stockholm. They claim that the high levels of support they receive from parents is due to the

fact that the majority of children attending their facility represent European, middle class, affluent, highly reflexive and liberal parents.

This opinion resonated in the interviews with school head teachers who face the many challenges of multiculturalism when trying to adopt the curriculum guidance on gender equality. On one hand they feel they have to respect the wishes of children's families, but on the other they were supposed to encourage healthy self-esteem, ambition, feelings of achievement and equal opportunities. The head teachers declared a very positive attitude towards the idea of gender neutrality in the classroom and they were taking steps towards achieving it. One thought the policy is still at an early stage and that they expect more guideline literature for teachers on the matter. They also feel that teachers may not have enough time to implement it properly due to time restrictions and multiple tasks. One was seeking to employ a member of staff that would specialise only in helping other staff implement this policy more effectively. Meetings with staff to discuss ways of improving gender neutrality are regularly in place. Students choose representatives who sit in at these meetings and then work as information hubs for the exchange of information between students and staff. There is also an incident report form created for all instances of unequal treatment, intended to combat bullying, sexism and racism, should it occur. One felt that being a champion in this area is very important and that through the recent course for newly appointed head teachers run at SU, she was well prepared to implement gender neutral policy. Participation in a municipal group of head teachers confirms that other head teachers are also promoting gender neutrality in their facilities, fully embracing the concept and exchanging good practice on how to prepare and help teachers in the implementation of such practice.

Through the use of participant observations, the author noticed multiple practices of compensatory pedagogy, e.g. positive reinforcement of brave and active behaviour in girls and the rewarding of boys when they share or display affectionate behaviour. With the aim of combating stereotypes, a male teacher with a PhD in physics and applied mathematics ran a sewing class where boys (age 9-11) made pink bean-bag cats and girls made navy blue sailors hats. A great level of 'self censorship' of what teachers say and how they say it when interacting with children was also noted. Special laboratories for applied sciences are equipped with machinery and space to use 'touch and feel' methods of understanding in learning. One of the schools had a petting zoo with the

aim of encouraging care for 'dependents' and to provide a quiet place to reflect. Pupils with emotional trauma or 'bad' behaviour are sent to spend time with birds, snakes, fish and rodents, to clean their cages, feed them and pet them. It is interesting that most pupils sent there are boys, most volunteers are girls. Boys are encouraged to read more and girls are encouraged to talk more. Teachers are trying to give similar levels of attention to girls and boys, although boys sometimes gain more attention due to negative behaviour (mainly disturbing). One of the teachers said that for her it is very important to create cooperation between genders in the classroom and that she achieved it in sports, by having mixed teams, e.g. in basketball and football. Apparently, boys were very upset at first as they felt that girls hold them back in winning competitions against other schools, but girls wanted to be on the same team as boys and were determined to be, so the teacher decided to make a mixed team. With time they cooperate better and help each other more, they work as a real team also outside sport activities. It helped to make decisions about extra-curricular activities and trips more democratic where a consensus was reached much quicker than in the past. A common practice is for teachers to code the students name on tests and written assignments, so that they did not know whose test they are checking and grading. During *'Fritidshem'* (afternoon extracurricular, structured, leisure time activities during school hours), one of the visited schools had a lottery where children draw random partners for play activities and they also draw lots in regards to materials (e.g. fabric, paints, sequins, balloons) or toys that they will be given to play or work with. This allows them to 'choose' play partners that they may not normally choose and to play with toys or items they have never even thought of using. This sometimes helps them to make interesting discoveries, without being judged. This is one of the practical representations of how to implement gender neutrality in school practice.

Not everyone in Sweden understands or supports the idea of gender neutrality. Some parents are worried or even alarmed by the idea, that in their view, removes gender identity from a child. As one may note after reading the above paragraphs, this is not quite the idea behind the theoretical construct. However Swedish and international media heat up the discussions on the subject matter and confuse the public. Articles written in an alarming tone show the dangers neutrality poses as a societal threat that may be especially harmful to innocent children subjected to gender pedagogy (see e.g.: Prince Birkeland, 2012; Rothschild, 2012;

Soffel, 2011; The Week Staff, 2011). This is a reaction to challenging norms and questioning what is a norm, which reveals the power that existing norms hold. This is also a form of a 'backlash' described by Susan Faludi in the 1980's in relation to feminism. Nevertheless, a gradual change of gender attitudes has already started at a nursery level in Sweden. The change comes from the universities as they are the incubators of new pedagogical, norm critical thinking and from the government that for years regardless of coalition, has supported gender equality in Swedish education. There is also evidence that gender stereotyping and a gendered classroom environment has an impact, and often a negative one, on children's opportunities and life choices (e.g. Favara, 2012; Holmlund & Sund, 2005).

All questionnaire respondents declared a positive attitude towards gender neutrality and viewed it as needed, desired, obvious, very good, positive, important or very important. The majority connected it with equality and focused mainly on the empowerment of girls and women's rights. According to some teachers that filled in the questionnaires, the Swedish word *jämställdhets*—equality, is used more often than: *könsneutralitet*—gender neutrality, when describing the same set of practices, which in their essence derived from the concept of gender neutrality and norm critical pedagogy. They feel that at an academic level and through reflexivity gained at universities, most graduates of humanist and social sciences naturally join the two into one. Equality = neutrality. Surprisingly these were also the feelings expressed by the ERASMUS respondents who represented multiple European and Far East countries. Was it simply an expression of what they have learnt through their stay with SU or of the political correctness it encourages? Examples given by respondents indicated otherwise, showing a deep understanding of the interconnectivity between equality and gender neutrality that was not only Sweden based, but referred to their own countries of origin and examples of gender neutral best practice in their home education systems.

Gendered or non-gendered post-human

In conclusion one may ask if this particular Swedish lead on equality, through innovative efforts in education, is an expression of post-human ideology. How can it even be analysed using a set of traditional, not to say 'old fashioned' norms and praxis, when it is clearly based on decon-

struction of traditional gender norms and on Haraway's notion of 'becoming' situated knowledge (1988)? In the authors view, gender neutrality truly is a reflexion of post-human pedagogical thought. Nevertheless, it serves as a much needed force in the quest for social justice that is carried on the wave of ongoing human advancement both in technology and in critical philosophy, that has turned social sciences towards post-human thought. New phenomena bring new issues, new solutions and new visions of societal order that consequently challenge and undermine existing norms and customs.

The Swedish norm critical way of pedagogical thinking about gender and of a neutral attitude towards one's gender, is so profoundly grounded in individuals at universities, that it runs at a subconscious level and forms a part of Bourdieuan *habitus* and *doxa* of graduates. They may not even realize how deeply embedded the concept of gender neutrality is in their perception of gender equality. This inculcated drive for equity cascades down into classrooms and into nurseries, inscribing the embodiment of gender neutrality in everyday practice of the new generations of Swedes, at work and in personal life. This gender neutrality without a doubt is an expression of a post-human thought, yet as was discussed, it does not extract or remove gender from humans. Instead, it pushes humans outside of their comfort 'zone' filled with the pre post-human gender norms, that legitimize unjust structures of exclusion. In the authors view, gender neutrality in Swedish education, although not yet fully implemented, is intended to alter the way we think and act when confronted with indicators of 'otherness', to create a less gendered and more equal society.

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