

Doing Justice: Uses of Norm Critical Children's Picture Books in Swedish Preschools

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The aim of this article is to examine the perceptions and uses of norm critical literature in Swedish preschool. The research questions highlighted are: What primary uses are associated with norm critical literature in preschool, according to preschool teachers and observations of reading aloud? How does the (claimed) usage of norm critical literature relate to required anti-discrimination and gender equality work? These questions are answered by focusing on the perceptions of preschool teachers as expressed in qualitative interviews with seven educators, and by additional observations of teachers reading aloud to children at six preschools in three different communities in Sweden. The data is categorized by thematic analysis. Two main themes were discerned: "The mirror" and "Combatting (masculine) gender norms". The findings are primarily discussed in relation to Nancy Fraser's (1997) distinction of different kinds of justice and Chantal Mouffe's (2005) concept of the political. The study shows that norm critical literature is considered to be a tool in the obliged value work, used as a mirror and as a tool in combatting outdated gender norms, especially regarding masculinity. The conclusion is that justice in terms of recognition and affirmative recognition were prioritized, while justice in terms of

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redistribution or transformative recognition was not brought to the fore (Fraser 1997).

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s, gender equality has been part of the pedagogical content and the value basis, inscribed in curricula and the Education Act in Sweden. As stated in preschool curriculum: "The preschool also has a responsibility to combat gender patterns that limit children's development, choices and learning" (Skolverket 2018, 7). Further, anti-discrimination and democracy work is required: "No child in the preschool should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of the gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnic origin, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age" (Skolverket 2018, 5). In Sweden 2009, The National Agency for Education published a report on children's experiences with discrimination in preschool and school. According to the report, norm critical perspectives shall be part of examination objects in education of all teachers, including preschool teachers (Skolverket 2009). Today, this specific form of non-oppressive or anti-discrimination pedagogy, called "norm critical pedagogy", is frequently used in the legally mandated gender equality and non-discrimination work in Swedish preschools and schools. The implementation is anchored in laws against harassment and discrimination (School law 2010:800, chapter 6; Discrimination law 2008:567). One tool that has been used to work with norm critical pedagogy in preschools has been literature.

The aim of this article is to examine the perceptions and uses of norm critical literature in Swedish preschool. This qualitative study analyses the perceptions of educators using norm critical children's picture books and observations of reading aloud in relation to justice. Theoretically, the study draws in particular on Nancy Fraser's (1997) distinctions between different concepts of justice. The primary research questions are: What primary uses are associated with norm critical literature in preschool, according to preschool teachers and observations of reading aloud? How does the (claimed) usage of norm critical literature relate to the obliged anti-discrimination and gender equality work?

Background

Since the 2000s, equal treatment and gender equality work in Sweden have been highly influenced by so-called norm critical pedagogy (Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi 2011). Norm critical pedagogy is usually recognized as a more inclusive follow-up to pedagogy of tolerance and its surrounding discourse. The latter refers to pedagogic equality or anti-discrimination work that highlights prejudices by pinpointing what is regarded as deviant in order to make the majority more tolerant towards 'the Other' (Rosén 2010, 79). Norm critical pedagogy is highly influenced by Kumashiro's work on anti-oppressive pedagogy (2002) and by intersectional theory (Crenshaw 2003). Norm critical pedagogy aims to highlight the production and reproduction of dominating norms to prevent or stop exclusion or any kind of discrimination (Bromseth and Darj 2010; Kalonaityté 2014; Vinthagen and Zavalía 2014; Salmson and Ivarsson 2015).

Norm critical pedagogy was launched as a democracy and/or equality platform, a means of doing justice by pursuing diversity and inclusiveness. However, as Langmann and Månsson have illustrated, the dominating norm critical pedagogy discourse could also be regarded as an enlightening project rooted in classical modern ideals, reproducing a classical modern subject of reason rather than a post-structural, non-transparent and ever-changing subject. On the one hand, it works as an extension of the established (gender) equality work, building its legitimacy on the basis of equal treatment regulations and anti-discrimination policies. On the other hand, it tends to focus on individual liberation and identity rather than on socioeconomic inequality (Langmann and Månsson 2017). Norm critical pedagogy seems to be ideologically multifaceted. It clearly opposes conservative tendencies such as homophobia, sexism, and racism, but it also focuses on diversity on behalf of socioeconomic equality, and justice might pave the way for neoliberalism. Difficulties in implementing norm critical perspectives in practice have been discussed by other researchers (Gunnarsson 2019; Eidevall and Lenz Taguchi 2011).

One way of implementing norm critical perspectives is through the use of literature. Around 2006 to 2007, a few self-labelled norm critical publishing houses opened in Sweden: Vilja, Olika, Sagolikt and Vombat. Two of them, Vombat and Olika, still exist as independent houses, the latter being the larger of the two, and the one having the greater engagement with

preschools. Olika has been launching various kinds of books within the norm critical niche, textbooks as well as children's books for readers of various ages. In their international catalogue, the profile of the publishing house is declared: "The word OLIKA means different in Swedish and our books are different from the ones usually found in the children's section in that they challenge stereotypes and limiting norms" (Olika 2018a). Norm critical literature often includes tutorial material such as specific guidelines for each title. In earlier times, this work had to be purchased, but today this material can be downloaded free of charge. The books and the educational material are to a great extent linked to the preschool curriculum, marketed as a tool that can be used for (gender) equality and norm critical work. In short, this publishing house has from the outset used promoting strategies primarily addressing preschools. In recent years several of the dominating publishing houses in children's literature have become more oriented towards diversity and inclusion, especially regarding aspects of gender and family constellations. The publishing of children's picture books challenging white, heterosexual middle-class norms has increased since about 2014 (Svenska barnboksintitutet 2017).

Survey of the field

There is important research on gender equality work oriented towards changing outdated gender norms in Swedish preschools. Klara Dolk's study of a preschool working actively with gender pedagogy and basic values is an important study done in a Swedish context. From a child-adult relation perspective, Dolk highlights the inherent conflict between norm critical ambitions and its prescriptive or normative dimensions. This conflict results in tensions in equality work but may also bring about space for both critical and novel ways of thinking (Dolk 2013). As Dolk points out, gender pedagogical and equal rights work often emphasize positive examples and role models rather than social injustice and inequalities. Setting good examples can sometimes be important though too much focus on individual success might overshadow significant conflicts and hierarchies (Dolk 2013). Such a pedagogical strategy is in line with gender equality politics in the 1960s and '70s, where girls and women were encouraged to enter traditional masculine areas and hence achieve greater power (Eidevald and Lentz Taguchi 2011). Another Swedish scholar, Karin Gunnarsson, discusses

the potential to challenge norms regarding masculinity along with the dangers of stabilizing and homogenizing a messy reality in which various masculinities blur and evolve. Gunnarsson (2019) problematizes norm critical pedagogy from a post-humanistic angle, calling for increased acknowledge of the embedding and embodying of normative logics in the study of teaching practices on equality in social studies, but in a Swedish upper secondary school. The scholar Lena Martinsson scrutinizes the idea of transition as a basic notion in the fundamental values and in norm pedagogical work in schools and preschools in Sweden. Her problematizing of norm critical pedagogy connects to Dolk's, expanding on the implied adult-child perspective. The idea of transition means, according to Martinsson, that adults are supposed to provide children with "correct" values and norms. Despite the aim of teaching justice and (gender) equality implicitly, this idea instead tends to enhance existing asymmetric relations by reproducing relations of power, with respect to child-adult relations, as well as structures and norms regarding class, nationality and so on (Martinsson 2014). None of these studies focuses on literary reading.

Regarding gender work in preschool, Mia Heikkilä's study of data from all Nordic countries is of relevance. Through interviews and policy document analysis, Heikkilä shows that there is generally no systematic gender work, though all Nordic preschools have a gender equality work assignment. Heikkilä (2020) stresses the need for further research on how policy implicates practical work concerning value-based issues. Though not examining systematic aspects of gender equality work, our small scaled qualitative study aims to contribute in mending this lacuna by adding new knowledge of gender equality work in preschool practice while focusing on the usage of norm critical literature.

Nevertheless, there are several studies showing that young children challenge norms regarding, for instance, gender, while the same norms are being upheld by educators (Thorne 1993; Årlemalm-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson 2009; Hellman 2010, Hellman 2013). The pedagogy scholar Anette Hellman argues that: "Children try, repeat and question norms that they recurrently are presented to" (Hellman 2013, 143). However, this does not always mean that binary gender norms are enhanced by children. According to Hellman (2013), there is a continuous negotiation of norms, especially regarding age and gender.

From an educational perspective, Susan Woolley (2015, 2017) has shown in several studies conducted in the US, that a heteronormative binary gender ideology is reproduced by a schooling system imbedded in new liberalism and the idea of individual choice. Woolley is also interested in how LGBTQ students are silenced in school (Woolley 2014). She argues the need to “frame additive models of diversity or multicultural education so that an analysis of power and intersectionality are center, or in other words, so that our focus shifts from the individual to the structural level” (Woolley 2017, 94). Woolley’s call is also relevant to our study, in that the experiences of preschool teachers using norm critical literature is related to Fraser’s concept of justice (see below).

Magdalena Hulth and Hedda Schönback have reflected on their own efforts to work gender pedagogically or norm critically (the authors do not make any distinctions in these concepts in the article) by reading a picture book with five-year-olds in preschool, exclusively focusing on the pictures. The task was not about working with a piece of literature, but of letting the children create new stories using characters that had been literally cut out, copied, and renamed by the scholars and the children (Hulth and Schönback 2011). In addition, Karin Murriss’ study on student teachers reading philosophical picture books to small children concludes that focusing on the questions and concerns of children from the beginning can help “go beyond the strategic use of children’s literature in education” (Murriss 2014, 164). Further, she finds that, when read as both philosophy and literature, some literary works can open up common-sense conceptions of feelings such as anger and frustration to socio-political and moral questioning (Murriss 2014).

Regarding research on norm critical literature, there are few studies in Sweden (Heggstad 2013; Hermansson and Nordenstam 2017; Jönsson 2017). These studies all focus on the literary texts, not on how literature is used in preschools. Neither are educators’ perspectives examined. Overall, there are very few studies on the opinions of the preschool teachers on literature reading, especially reading aloud (Alatalo and Westlund 2019; Damber 2015; Simonsson 2006), also internationally (Shedd and Duke 2008). There are, as far as we know, no earlier studies on how norm critical literature is used and perceived in Swedish preschools.

Theoretical frame

The point of departure of this article is the American critical theorist Nancy Fraser's (1997) theory of justice. Justice, from a norm critical perspective, is primarily about diversity and inclusion. To comprehend the uses of norm critical pedagogy, especially the uses of norm critical literature, Nancy Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution is useful. Recognition refers to cultural or symbolic aspects of justice, related to "identity politics" and patterns of representation. It means recognition of difference, for example, "under the banner of nationality, ethnicity, 'race', gender, and sexuality" (Fraser 1997, 11). Justice in terms of redistribution is about economic justice. Transformative redistribution means a "deep reconstruction of relations of production" (Fraser 1997, 27). Affirmative remedies or "mainstream multiculturalism" is a common response to misrecognition, though this merely approaches the symptoms by unjustly revaluing group identities and leaving underlying structures of inequality intact: "Whereas affirmative recognition remedies tend to promote existing group differentiation, transformative recognition remedies tend, in the long run, to destabilize them so as to make room for future regroupments" (Fraser 1997, 24).

Fraser argues that both recognition and redistribution are necessary to achieve justice, though the critical point is the relation between them. Her main argument is that recognition became dominant on behalf of redistribution during the late twentieth century. However, Fraser admits that justice in terms of recognition and justice in terms of redistribution in practice are intertwined (1997, 15). This does not mean presupposing an ontological difference or that separating the one from the other would be a simple thing. In a more recent work, Fraser and Honneth add a few points by further emphasizing the interdependence, seeking a way beyond both economism and culturalism: "misrecognition and maldistribution are so complexly intertwined today that each must be grasped from a larger, integrated perspective that also encompasses the other" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 36).

By using the distinction between redistribution and recognition, we will be able to highlight various aspects of justice and injustice, as well as various remedies emphasized in the interviews with preschool teachers and observational data.

In addition, Mouffe's (2005) concept of the political will be utilized to analyse how use of norm critical literature relates to justice. In Chantal Mouffe's notion of the liberal, individualistic orientation towards pluralism, different perspectives and values "constitute a harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble [...] why this type of liberalism must negate the political in its antagonistic dimension" (2005, 14). Such a comprehension of pluralism is not compatible with a democracy "which postulates equality for all the citizens" (Mouffe 2005, 127). According to Mouffe, the political includes agonism, or choosing between conflicting alternatives. From this perspective, norm critical discourse instead pursues diversity in a non-political respect. In the analysis, we show how the political (or non-political) in relation to norm critical literature work at preschool to examine what conception(s) of justice that is manifested.

When examining the perceptions and uses of norm critical literature in preschool, we are influenced by Judith Butler's (1990) post-structuralistic work focusing how gender is done and negotiated in different contexts. Gender identity is comprehended as unstable, anchored in structures of power, discourses, and social norms, but still able to change. The emphasis on highlighting and transforming processes of norms is central to all norm critical work. It is also a fundament in the publishing of norm critical children's literature.

Empirical material and method

The empirical material of this study consists of six semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers and seven observational studies of norm critical reading and book talks in preschools. The study is restricted to municipal preschools in order that a balanced corpus might be attained. This organizational form is also the far most common in Sweden, representing about 75% of the total amount (Skolverket 2014). The preschools in this study consist of a random sample of preschools claiming to use norm critical literature on a regular basis. We started by calling a number of municipal preschools in a big city in Sweden to find some of those reading norm critical children's literature on a regular basis and were willing to participate in the study. A large number claimed not to read this kind of literature on a regular basis, some were not familiar with the concept of norm critical literature and others had a number of norm critical titles on

their bookshelves but felt that they had neither the time nor the ability to contribute. It turned out to be rather difficult gaining access to preschools due to understaffing and frequent staff changes. The interviews with preschool teachers and the observations were done at three different locations in Sweden 2017-2018. At all these preschools, there was a range of norm critical books, ordered by the directors of the preschools.

Our aim was to find geographic and socioeconomic variation. One preschool was situated in the centre of a big city in southwest Sweden (A), and three were situated in crane municipalities (B and C are two departments under the same management) and (D) in in another crane municipality. Two interviews were conducted at two preschools in a small municipality in southern Sweden, one outside the centre of the city (E) and one in the centre of the city (F). One interview took place in the north, on the outskirts of the centre of the city (G). Preschools (A), (B), (C) and (G) were LGBTQ-certified by The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Rights (RFSL). (D) had been participating in an international norm critical project.

Ambitions, knowledge, and especially material and social conditions varied between the different preschools. The various socioeconomic premises were significant, though this variable is not a primary focus in this article since this is a small scale, qualitative study, with a restricted amount of data.

In arriving at each preschool, we started by observing a reading aloud session. In advance, we had asked the preschool teachers to choose one norm critical book from their stock to read aloud in the manner in which they usually performed this activity. All of them had in advance picked a number of children to attend the reading, and the children were informed about the planned activity and about our arrival. The book or, in some cases, the two or three books were read aloud with a small group of participants, 4-7 children, aged 3-5. We tried not to affect the preschool teacher's choice of or the number of participants who were present at the readings, nor their physical placement in the room. In advance, the children's parents had given informed consent for the study by signing a form sent to the preschool. We did not speak or intervene during the reading or the various kinds of book talks that took place. During the reading aloud, we made audio recordings and took field notes. The

collected observation data function as additional material. The empirical material consists mainly of interviews, approached by thematic content analysis (Bryman 2016). This means that the analytical work started by identifying interesting aspects in the data, which were relevant to the research questions. After that, the data were coded by focusing on recurrent findings, which were eventually grouped into two themes. The interviews were audio recorded by computer or mobile phone and lasted 30-60 minutes. Three of the interviews took place at distant preschools, which is why only one of us was present. The informants were all female, educated with preschool teacher exams. They had been working as preschool teachers between 3 and 35 years. The interviews were transcribed lightly and then translated by the authors. The informants were anonymized and referred to by letters: (A) - (G). The audio files are saved on a USB device at the university.

The combination of methods - collecting data by interviews and observations - was done to examine how norm critical books are used in reading aloud situations, e.g. what the preschool teacher and children commented on in relation to the norm critical book. Through interviews, we could increase our knowledge of the preschool teachers' perceptions regarding the use of this literature in practice. The observations were additive, done with the aim of gaining knowledge of how reading aloud was performed in practice, by focusing on each educator's framing and the children's responses. We chose not to use a video camera and to include interaction analysis, since this would have made this a much larger and much more time-consuming project. The data analysis was made thematically, to discern potential patterns but also strikingly singularities in relation to the overall aim of how norm critical literature was used in regard to justice.

Ethical Aspects

All participants received information about the aim of the study in advance, and the research ethics according to the principles of consent, confidentiality and usefulness were promised by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). The participating preschool teachers were informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any time without any explanation, according to the consent requirement. The children

observed during reading aloud and book talks were informed about the study and its purpose in advance. Since the children were younger than 15 years old, their parents/guardians had to grant their approval by signing a document informing them of the study and the premises of participation. The researchers have the responsibility of anonymizing the participants' statements in the article, and all personal names as well as preschools have been anonymized.

Analysis and Results

In this section, the analysis is set out thematically. The first theme, “The Mirror”, focuses on questions concerning norm critical literature as a means of implementing diversity and identification in various ways by perceiving and using literature as a supposed mirror, reflecting either individual or social lives. The second theme, “Combatting (masculine) gender norms”, captures perceptions and uses of norm critical literature as a means to change excluding masculine norms and stereotypes.

The Mirror

All preschool teachers in this study submitted norm critical literature as an important tool to use in the gender equality, anti-discrimination and democracy work obliged by the curriculum in which diversity is also emphasized. When asked about the assets of this niche genre, one preschool teacher (F) answered:

These are good books because they are reality. A fairytale is a fairytale, but these books are what children can experience for themselves. They sometimes trigger real questions.

In fact, this educator hails norm critical children's literature as a kind of mirror. She even says that these books do not differ from reality, but rather that “they are reality”. The books are not perceived as realistic in the sense that they use specific literary strategies. The educator instead points to a supposed “realness” as being important. The picture books read during our observations were all more or less realistic. However, not all norm critical children's picture books are necessarily realistic; there are norm critical

books with more or less profound fantastic elements such as *Jösta och Johan* ["*Jösta and Johan*" 2010] and *Kivi och Monsterhund* ["*Kivi and the Monsterdog*" 2012]. Another educator argues that:

If there would be a family with [same sex parents], then you do not point to them, then you have ... well, in this book, there are two daddies. (C)

It is notable that our informants pinpoint realistic aspects or realistic ways of reading, emphasizing the importance of presenting the children literature through which they can recognize experiences from real life. This is to a certain extent a result of the educator's choice of books. Thus, justice is pursued by both affirming and broadening the range of individual experiences depicted, which recalls Fraser's (1997) concept of recognition as well as Woolley's (2017) critique of a new liberal identity production within the schooling system.

Employing norm critical literature seems to be less about using these books as a point of departure for reflection or discussion of values or other aspects of justice than about sharing experiences and providing positive examples. The primary aim according to the interviews is about offering possibilities of identification for every child, but also to bring about diversity by broadening the scope of representations.

One of the informants told us that they had strived to have a range of books at the preschool library that as a whole in one or another way would reflect all protected groups: "Is there disability? Is there gender identity?" (C) Most of the informants claimed diversity to be the most valuable aspect of norm critical literature. As one of them put it: "All children ought to feel that they can identify. There will always be a need for identification. That is why diversity is important." (E) This statement claims diversity to be a means for identification, a conception reducing the meaning of diversity to a specific individual aim. The challenge, according to one of the preschool teachers (A), is to talk about norms without reinforcing them. Some of the norm critical books work toward that end, she argues. One of our informants (B) told of how the educators at her department gradually had become aware of the importance of being proactive regarding diversity in order to make identification possible for each and every child:

The books are chosen to make it possible for everyone to be able to recognize him or herself. If we would get a child with hearing loss, we should have read about that in advance. (B)

Important issues of diversity and representation are repeatedly verbalized in terms of identification by mirroring in the interviews, though not always highlighted as in this statement. The content of the quote reflects the explicit intentions of the marketing material of the publishing houses. In practice, it would, according to our reasoning, be impossible to bring about a range of literature depicting literally all possible variations of functions, looks, backgrounds and so forth on an individual level. This is in line with the individualistic ideology characterizing equality work and norm critical pedagogy according to several studies (e.g. Dolk 2013; Woolley 2017).

Norm critical books are also hailed on behalf of their perceived ability to mirror social life and thereby expand the experiences of the individual child. One of the educators (C) talks of their ambition to make diversity visible by e.g. reading books about function variations:

Well, a person sitting in a wheelchair. There is no one at the moment, but then you can show by pictures that this actually exists [...]. Through literature, it is easy, perhaps easiest, to show differences.

All of the educators (A-G) engaged in the buying of books claimed to avoid books containing stereotypes, which meant old books containing, for example, gender stereotypes as in the picture books of the Swedish author Elsa Beskow (1874-1953), such as *Tomtebobarnen* (1910), where the mother and the girls are always at home spinning thread, while the boys are out hunting with the father.

Avoiding stereotypes by removing certain books or by actively not borrowing them from libraries can, be understood as a strategy of the preschool teachers', paving the way for a more inclusive literature, in which children can recognize themselves and/or their experiences.

It is also a way of implementing diversity, thereby preventing prejudices and discrimination, which is obliged by the curriculum (Skolverket 2018). At those preschools where the informants claim to read classic children's literature or fairytales containing stereotypes, most of the informants seek to adjust the content a bit to make it more inclusive by avoiding or changing

stereotypical depictions and words when reading aloud. Some of the informants expressed their preference for reading norm critical literature or other more modern, less stereotypical books rather than problematizing outdated norms found in older literature. When asked about the children's reactions towards stereotypes, the one informant who did not claim to adjust the text answered:

I don't know what to say. They listen. They do not reflect that much on it. (F)

She talked of norm critical literature as a complement:

It is not about removing books. It is about invoking thoughts and showing possibilities. (F)

This quote stresses a usage of norm critical literature aimed to state good examples, thus confirming Dolk's review of gender equality pedagogy, including norm critical pedagogy (Dolk 2013).

Combatting (masculine) gender norms

This part of the article highlights a bias in the interviews and observations towards gender norms, especially masculine gender norms on behalf of other norms and structures of power. Research has paid attention to this bias, linked to a masculine dominance, in relation to norm critical pedagogy and equality work in other contexts (Gunnarsson 2019; Woolley 2017). One preschool teacher (E) reckons the guidelines help in attaining the purpose of the book. When asked in what way, she pointed to concrete examples of uses of norm critical literature in order to stop gender-related exclusion. One of those examples was a situation at the hairdresser corner in the role-play room:

When some boys arrived, wanting to get barrettes, a girl reacted intensely: 'You cannot have that because you are boy, you can only get a haircut'. Then we thought that this book *Tesslas pappa vill inte* ["Tesla's daddy doesn't want to" 2011] could be an aid. After this it

got more natural for the children, it is okay. It is not that unfamiliar.
They sort of trust the books. (E)

This story of reversed child-adult relations tells about a dad who does not want to put on his clothes (a suit) or go to work. His child tries his/her best to lure him into going, for instance, he is offered barrettes and glitter only if he does what he is told. This strategy works, and the glittering man heads to his office. According to the preschool teacher cited above, norm critical work is about being sensitive to the children's interest and needs; that is where it starts. She elaborated on a problem they used to have at the department: some of the children used to be opposed to boys wearing dresses and other 'feminine' clothing:

I can tell of a situation the other day. Two girls were saying, "Boys cannot have long hair, boys cannot wear earrings". Then I reckoned that we have *Konrads klänning* ["Konrad's dress" 2015] So, then we read that book for a couple of days. (E)

After having read the book aloud, they performed an activity suggested in the tutorial: all the children got to dress up in dresses or tulle skirts. One boy in particular was, according to the educator, looking very happy, spinning around, saying: "I am glittering, I am glittering", just like Konrad says in the book. Then, according to the preschool teacher, the former clearly gendered dress code in the preschool group became less strict. This informant also described norm critical books being utilized to influence both girls and boys in a positive manner, to make children able to dress and play the way they wanted to no matter their sex or gender. Reading and using norm critical literature on a regular basis has, according to the preschool teacher, made a significant impact on the behaviour among the children:

We see that in the role play. It is accepted to get a barrette in the hairdresser. Now no one reacts if a boy arrives and puts on a dress or a fur vest. But we will never be done! (E)

These concrete examples show that the children tend to "trust" the presentations in the books, as the educator quoted above puts it. The last

sentence expresses a comprehension of norm critical pedagogy as an ongoing process, not a project that may be completed. Further, this way of using norm critical literature recalls Dolk's (2013) reasoning on a gender pedagogical tendency to bring about role models and success stories in current equality work at Swedish preschools.

The results of the interviews and observations show that it is primarily the norms regulating the behaviour of boys that are focused, by the preferred norm critical literature books as well as by the preschool teachers. According to the data, both girls and boys and, in some cases, also parents function as gatekeepers stuck with the binary gender norms that they have already learnt. Our data does not principally contain any example of problematizing feminine gendered norms. One of the educators (C) mentions that the children are more likely to have two mums in family play after having read and worked with norm critical literature. Neither are norms regarding class, religion or ability highlighted in relation to the uses of norm critical literature, even though the books deal with various norms. One of the informants (E) does call for more books depicting multicultural aspects, though. Family norms are touched upon in one reading aloud/book talk. One of the preschool teachers talked of the ambition of strengthening girls by reading books that present strong female protagonists like Pippi Longstocking, in order to bring about positive role models for girls (Dolk 2013). No such ambitions were visible in the above-mentioned examples of norm critical literature activities or in our observations.

The focus on the behaviour of boys recalls a traditional politics of gender equality, and a well-established part of Swedish gender equality politics. In short, this pedagogic of compensations means that boys should be encouraged to become milder and more careful, while girls should become tougher and more competitive. This approach enhances an understanding of two contrasting groups, thereby supporting the view that they can and should be treated differently (Bodén 2011). There are also risks in the intentions of challenging masculine norms by focusing the results on stabilizing and homogenizing "the messy reality of fluid masculinities" (Gunnarsson 2019, 9). On the other hand, the recurrent mention of boys' 'gender bending' could be regarded as a challenge of an equal gender politics aiming to make girls or women more advantaged (Eidevald and Taguchi 2011). Gender equality pedagogy based on binary understandings

of gender has been criticized for being contra productive, for preserving the gender power system at its fundamentals. These kinds of approaches mean ignoring the significance of other parameters like class and ethnicity. As Dolk points out, it completely neglects the fact that children just like all human beings do gender in various ways, in various situations and that gender is not a stable category (Butler 1990; Dolk 2013). These issues directly relate to questions of justice, in line with Fraser's (1997) pursuit of a remedy of transformative recognition, not overshadowing aspects of underlying power relations.

The educators express occasionally having experienced objections or reticence from the children's parents when using norm critical books. All their examples concern challenging of masculine norms picture books depicting two male homosexual giraffes or boys dressing up in feminine clothing. One of the informants reported about a dad reacting negatively when he saw his son wearing a tulle skirt at preschool (E). This happened when the children were performing an activity suggested in the guidelines accompanying *Konrads klänning*. The preschool teacher and her colleagues responded by referring to the preschool curricula and other regulatory documents as fundamentals to lean on. They told the father about the book they had read. He seemed to accept it, the educator stated, and he did not ask more about the norm critical work. Now the educators at this preschool regularly inform parents of their norm critical literature work in advance, in a way similar to that of how they inform parents of other activities. Then objections rarely or never occur, according to their claims. At another preschool (G), a boy wore a dress for a long period of time. None of the children nor parents commented on this. "That indicates a lot", the preschool teacher commented. However, they had been working intensely on gender and LGBTQ for a very long time, sometimes using norm critical literature. This preschool teacher recalled some objections from parents when they started working actively with gender issues in 2005. Some parents expressed their worries that the preschool would turn boys into girls. No interview or observation data in this study indicates a similar fear of girls expanding female gender norms.

It is clear that the norm challenging content is not always embraced or even accepted by the children, even though it is most often the case. At one reading aloud session, the book that was read was *Var är pappas skor?*

["Where are Daddy's Shoes?" 2015] by Kristina Murray Brodin and Bettina Johansson, and some children disdained the norm critical visual presentation of a dad. The picture book depicts a dad who at one of the pictures wears a dress and high heels:

- Whose shoes do you think those are? [The preschool teachers point at a pair of high heels]
- Mummy's! [Several children reply at once]

The preschool teacher (B) explained that those really are daddy's shoes, a pair that he uses to wear to parties. One of the children did not agree, and voiced a protest:

- That is not daddy!

This example can be analysed as a child repeating and thereby trying out dominating gender norms challenged by the norm critical book read by the preschool teacher. The child in this specific example challenges the intention of the norm critical intention by insisting on reading the visual presentation according to the gendered dressing-codes as she knows them. Obviously, this child has learnt of gender-dominating norms; they have become an integrated part of her perception.

- Is it not daddy? Who is it then?
- Mummy!
- But that is daddy actually, he is wearing a dress in that picture!
- But that is not daddy, that is mummy!

Obviously, this child perceived the visual presentation of dad as a feminine one. The child firmly insisted that the character is female/mummy. The example mentioned above it is obvious that the preschool teacher did not dwell on such moments of friction, where differences in valuations were manifested. One might ask whether this child is acting according to the roles or is acting unruly? (Dolk 2013) This example of an unintended child's response may be regarded as a troubling of norms, or more specifically, a troubling of norm critical norms. Perhaps it is not a question of troubling norms in the supposedly progressive way as in Butler's writings on how

dominating gender norms are altered by being cited wrongly, or in other words, when they are being troubled (Butler 1990). However, if the norm critical approach also included child-adult relations, the 'misreading' could have been used as a starting point for a discussion of norms. The example above instead illustrated an asymmetric transition of norms (Martinsson 2014).

A more inclusive approach to the children's participation in the norm critical literature work was observed at another preschool (A). The educators had prepared a very ambitious literary activity in a decorated room. This time *Konrad lussar* ["Konrad and the Lucia procession" 2017] by Åsa Mendel-Hartvig and Caroline Röstlund was read aloud. The preschool teacher who read the book asked questions while reading, so called dialogic reading aloud. In brief, the book tells of a boy named Konrad and his friend Hedvig, who are about to participate in the Swedish tradition of celebrating Lucia by dressing up in various costumes. In a Lucia procession, some roles and attributes are traditionally associated with girls and others with boys. In this picture book, the boy and the girl (judging from their names) mix all of the traditional attributes, hence creating hybrid characters. After the reading, the children were asked to help to create characters used in this activity, trolls that recur at this preschool. The trolls were about to do a Lucia procession just like Konrad, and in a letter they were asked: "Who should we be?" Several of the children were eager to answer. Just like the characters in the book, they promoted various non-gender specific combinations of attributes. The activity ended with a request to make drawings depicting their answers. This norm critical activity is about diversity and gender patterns. It confirms Hellman's (2013) findings regarding children's playful questioning of gender. In this, it is a doing of justice in terms of recognition. The remedy for misrecognition is however not merely affirmation since the children are invited to create their own combination without norms regarding gender or a binary conception of gender is reproduced (Fraser 1997). Structures of power are not highlighted but are rather combated by ignoring them.

Discussion

The primary aim of this article has been to examine the perceptions and uses of norm critical literature in preschool. The research questions

highlighted are: What primary uses are associated with norm critical literature in preschool, according to preschool teachers and observations of reading aloud? How does the (claimed) usage of norm critical literature relate to obliged anti-discrimination and gender equality work?

These questions are answered by analysing the preschool teacher's perceptions, expressed in a small scale qualitative study based on interviews with seven educators, and by additional observations of reading aloud sessions with children at six preschools in three different locations in Sweden. The data is categorized by thematic analysis. Two main themes were discerned: "The Mirror" and "Combatting (masculine) gender norms".

Within the first theme, "The Mirror", we show that the preschool teachers hail norm critical literature as a means of presenting the children possibilities for identification. This is part of the obliged equality work, and it is also perceived as a way of achieving diversity. All the children would be entitled to find their lives and experiences mirrored in order to identify. This can be regarded as a question of justice in terms of recognition, following Fraser's reasoning (1997). The article shows that the use of norm critical literature in preschool tends to stress issues of recognition on behalf of issues of redistribution, and by doing so it in fact separates cultural or symbolic aspects from issues of socioeconomic equality. Misrecognition or supposed misrecognition is mended by affirmative rather than transformative recognition (Fraser 1997). This is manifested in the recurrent pursuit to bring about children's literature in which every ground for discrimination or any kind of functional variation is represented, a literature in which every child can find his or her experiences mirrored. It is clear from the analysis that norm critical literature is to a great extent regarded as a means of implementing diversity according to curricula and other regulations regarding anti-discrimination and gender equality in preschool. As in these documents, this study shows an emphasis on issues of gender equality in the comprehensions and uses of the specific niche genre.

The study indicates a tendency to focus norms of masculinity, which is shown in the secondary theme, "Combatting (masculine) gender norms". The emphasis on masculine gender norms is discussed in many norm critical books and is enhanced by our interview and observation data. None of the informants mentioned any examples of similar efforts to expand

norms restricting girls in an exclusive way. Nevertheless, the changing of boys' behaviour also meant a changing of girls' behaviour and feminine norms, e.g. in the activity aimed to make girls more open-minded regarding barrettes. Changing masculine norms also means changing feminine norms, in a binary gender system where masculinities are made and perceived in relation to femininities.

Norms regarding other power relations were touched on briefly in our data, while the main emphasis was on (masculine) gender issues. The observed uses of norm critical literature, primarily dialogic reading, mainly serve as starting points for a confirming, expanding, and sharing of the children's individual experiences. Thematically or other literary aspects of the books were not paid any attention to; there was a striking dominance of realistic modes of reading. The analysis of interview data supports our observations indicating that norm critical literature book talk is used primarily to process children's experiences from their own lives. This is in line with Dolk's reasoning on the lack of questions of inequality in the work with fundamental values and gender pedagogy in preschool. This is, according to Dolk, linked to a general avoidance of what might be regarded as political (Dolk 2013; Mouffe 2005). When occasionally conflicting views were discerned in the literary activities, the preschool teacher did not initiate a common reflection or a discussion on the subject. Hence, the uses of norm critical literature examined in this study are not political in Mouffe's sense, while conflicts or opposing valuations are avoided rather than highlighted and scrutinized (Mouffe 2005).

The current titles framed the talk, making some issues more likely to be broached than others. The books used by preschool teachers in this study do not really call for disagreements or political debate, but rather serve to implement gender equality and to present diversity. The preschool teachers oscillated between a new liberal pluralistic approach to diversity (regarding perspectives and experiences) and an ambition to achieve a transition of values (regarding gender norms) (Woolley 2017; Martinsson 2014). Some of the preschool teachers shared experiences of positive changes in attitudes over time when reading and using norm critical literature, especially regarding gender roles and boys' behaviour. However, the children's response to the norm critical literature was not always as intended. At one of the observed readings discussed above, a child stuck to dominant gender

patterns, an “unruliness” that did not lead to a discussion of values. This objection was silenced by the adult’s correction. This is one example of norm critical books used in an adult-child transition of values (Martinsson 2014). Manifested differences regarding norms and values in reading activities were not paid attention to or reflected on by the preschool teachers, but were instead overshadowed, which confirms Dolk's (2013) studies of gender equality work in preschool.

To sum up this study indicates, with a few exceptions, a doing of justice in terms of a top-bottom transition of values. Justice in terms of diversity was pursued in the sense that children in most of the book talks were asked to share experiences from their own lives. This usage can be comprehended as a doing of justice in the sense of pursuing recognition and in the sense that is also called for by the content and presentations of norm critical books. Rather, it is an explicit intention inherent in the concept of norm critical publishing per se, namely, to combat stereotypes and make a broader scope of bodies and experiences visible in children’s literature. It is not primarily about getting one’s individual experiences recognized, but rather of having opportunities to meet a variety of literary characters regarding differences such as gender, skin colour and family constellations. This is in line with Fraser’s reasoning on symbolic or cultural struggle towards injustices in terms of mis- or non-recognition, to not be rendered invisible or disrespected or the subject of stereotypic cultural representations (Fraser 1997, 2003). This is also a purpose manifested repeatedly in our interviews and observations. However, variations regarding economic means or social privilege are not really paid attention to in our material. This brings us to the conclusion that justice in terms of recognition and affirmative recognition were prioritized, while justice in terms of redistribution or transformative recognition was not brought to the fore (Fraser 1997, 2003).

As stated above, plurality regarding norms or values was not called for, but rather, it was avoided. This could be explained both by the range of books and the tutorial content. However, through a more symmetric and less top-down approach in terms of adult-children relations, even children’s occasional rejections of the norm critical content could have been taken into account as a starting point for dialogue. This does not mean taking a relativistic stance, or that the preschool teacher should affirm every

utterance or point of view, but that various kinds of differences and even divergences would be recognized as such. This in turn could make a basis for a more comprehensive norm critical literature doing of justice, opening up for discussions of political aspects and issues of justice in terms of both (transformative) recognition and redistribution. Whether such a literary usage would benefit from the specific norm critical niche genre or not is an open question, which depends on the specific choice of book as well as the pedagogical approach.

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