Post-humanist Theory in Swedish Early Childhood Education Policy and Practice - Opportunities and dilemmas

Therese Larsson

Malmö University
therese.larsson@mah.se
The philosophical ideas and theories that are drawn upon in different aspects of the present Early Childhood Education (ECE) discourse have significant effect on what actions are being justified and performed in educational practice (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). In relation to the revised Swedish curriculum for preschool coming into effect (2011), a support material was published by the Swedish National Agency of Education about working with a teacher’s clarified responsibility to document, evaluate and develop preschool practice (Palmer, 2012). The support material was distributed to all preschools in Sweden. The method suggested in the support material is pedagogical documentation, a tool developed by the teachers in the municipal nurseries and preschools in Reggio Emilia in northern Italy (Edwards, 2011). Focusing on children’s learning strategies, pedagogical documentation can be explained as a tool for making pedagogical practice visible and subject to collective interpretation and reflection (Skolverket 2005; 2008; Palmer, 2012). As such, the pedagogical documentation is emphasized as a potential mediator between theory and practice. In the support material, the postmodern social constructionist theoretical framework previously associated with pedagogical documentation is challenged, and the author promotes a theoretical point of view where the force and impact of nonhuman subjects and material objects on children’s subjectification and knowledge construction are taken into consideration. In this case, the theoretical standpoint promoted is referred to as ‘post-constructionism’ (Palmer, 2012). The broader ontological term used in both popular and research-based writings addressing the practical use of pedagogical documentation in educational practice is, however, ‘post-humanism’ (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Lenz Taguchi 1997/2013; Lenz Taguchi, 2012).

The fact that a clear theoretical standpoint is made by the Swedish National Agency of Education in an official policy document, especially one giving directions to the everyday preschool practice, can be considered unique. In this short paper, I discuss some of the issues raised concerning the application of post-humanist theory in the Swedish ECE discourse and practice. In order to do so I must first take a closer look at some of the post-humanist theoretical premises that through different types of publications dealing with pedagogical documentation have come to be associated with the same.

A material turn

In trying to overcome the hierarchical binary divide between theory and practice, word and world, a more holistic understanding of the nature of the world is called for (Palmer, 2012; Lenz Taguchi 2012). Theorists, such as the Dutch philosopher Anmmarie Mol who describe the utterly relational nature of existence with the words “to be is to be related”, (2002, p. 52) are drawn upon. The borderlines between the subject and object are understood to be blurred, and to be is, according to e.g. Donna Haraway (another theorist strongly associated with the post-human theoretical movement), described as “becoming with” (2008, p. 3). To further overcome and move beyond the so-called Cartesian cut between mind and matter, the internal and external, subject and object, the ideas of feminist physicist Karen Barad figure as sources of inspiration (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Lenz Taguchi 2012). Barad (2007) proposes a re-evaluation of language that supports such binary thinking, for example, by the formulation of new concepts. Barad’s neologism “onto-epistemology” describes the inseparability between ontology and epistemology and the intertwined relationship between knowing and being, or to phrase it differently, knowing as a part of being.

In this context the post-humanist critique of the humanist tradition and the humanistic ideal of western society is worth considering. The presumption that humans stand above all other species (as a sort of human chauvinism) and have specific value, special privileges and rights based on the simple fact of being human, is dismissed. According to an anti-anthropocentric argumentation there is no

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1 Post-constructionism can be regarded as an overarching umbrella term for related epistemological perspectives.
2 I use the concept of material turn to denote a category of theories, philosophical ideas and trans-disciplinary studies that have emerged in opposition to the -by for example Rorty (1992) called- linguistic turn in Western philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century.
autonomous rational human subject. There is no cogito and no binary divide between mind and body, thought and reason are not regarded as the prerequisites for existence (Åsberg, Hultman & Lee, 2012). In terms of education, the human subject is not regarded as the instrument and product. Learning is understood to be an effect of the nonhierarchical relations between humans and nonhumans in relational networks (Pedersen, 2010). To return to the support material that I mentioned initially, the description of learning states that:

... children seem to be constantly busy establishing relationships with their environment, both to other people and as well as to books, pens, colors, clays, water and paper. Light, sound, cold, heat, rain and sunshine are also involved in learning [my translation] (Palmer, 2012, p. 29).

Opportunities and dilemmas

In an age when individualization, autonomy and independent and self-evaluated learning are rising on the education policy agenda, working with pedagogical documentation is highlighted as an alternative in designing and understanding preschool educational practice (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Lenz Taguchi 2000; 2007). In trying to challenge dominant discourses and systems of thought, post-humanist theory is introduced as a theoretical point of departure (Palmer, 2012; Lenz Taguchi 2012).

Through the Swedish National Agency of Education, post-humanist theory is being incorporated in the official ECE discourse. This causes a paradoxical dilemma since post-humanist theoretical arguments are incorporated into the same discourses (e.g. an anthropocentric educational system) which the post-humanist theoretical movement at the same time claims to challenge. Via policy documents, such as the support material for working with pedagogical documentation, teachers are encouraged to use post-humanist theory in understanding, designing and evaluating everyday educational practice. A great responsibility rests on the teachers themselves to concretize and apply these theoretical ideas. The act is not unproblematic, since their work is also regulated by both national and local curricula, which in most cases is based on entirely different theoretical premises.

References


E.g. Dahlbeck, 2013.


