Traditionally, the school pupil has been regarded as an important actor, both in the preservation of society and in encountering predicted outcomes of the future. Today, even the youngest children are included in the educational project, fabricating 1-5-year-olds as universal pathfinders for the somewhat conflicting mission of creating both economic growth and sustainable development (European Commission, 2010). Considering this process, it is worth examining how the young child is articulated as an educable subject within the framework of dominating perspectives in the ECEC[1] field. We do so by focusing on two contrasting discursive movements: the policy-driven social economic and the philosophically inclined posthumanist discourses. These discourses provide seemingly opposing basic assumptions about the subject within the same educational context, that is, early education. Yet, education is accentuated in both discourses as the single most important factor in handling contemporary and future global economic, social and ecological crisis.

In what many scholars, as well as educational policy actors, call a precarious time long-term challenges such as globalisation and the pressure on resources are intensified (e.g. Malone, Truong & Gray, 2017; Taylor & Giugni, 2012; European Commission, 2010). In Early Childhood Education policy, the child figures as a social, economic and political project, mirroring both the existing society and current political endeavours in trying to control the outcome of the future. Recurring in the history of the young institutionalised child is the idea that the child can be emancipated and released from a future predestined by unfavourable background conditions (connected to culture and socioeconomic environment), through education. This assuming that children will participate in education early on, which is why the goal of providing preschool activities for all children (even when the economic or the social incentives are missing) is prominent in the international education policy for younger children (Nagazawa, Peters & Swadener, 2014). This idea of the educable child focuses on individual cognition and receptivity in relation to predefined subject knowledge, where education is the "intervention" that captures political intentions and expectations (Eurostat, 2017) through, what we call, a social economic discourse. The social economic discourse is not uniform but contains several different intentions within the governing field of education, which together produce a particular subject: the entrepreneur, ready to invest in her/himself and in the future (Bacchi, 2009). However, the social economic discourse, albeit historically dominant within the ECEC field, has not been unopposed. The emergence of critical pedagogies and the growing interest in the sociology of childhood in the 1980s and 90s, offered alternatives to the developmentalist and social economic view on the child. In the wake of these movements, posthumanist theory has gained an increasing influence in early education research at large, and in the ESD field in particular[2]. According to the proponents of posthumanism, in order to thrive and survive we (as humans) need to re-evaluate our position in the world by realising the
complex relational nature of existence. In this endeavour, early education becomes crucial and posthumanist theory is proposed as an invitation to reconsider the humanist notion of “human” through the child (Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise, 2012).

By studying the terms and conditions of the social economic and posthumanist discourses, we examine what is represented as being at stake (e.g. growth, competitiveness, the environment and not least human survival) and offer a critical reflection on the different, but surprisingly consistent, articulations of the educable young child.


Method

When inquiring into the construction of the educable child, we use the analytical concept of articulation inspired by Laclau & Mouffe (2001). The selection of primary materials used for the analysis are significant either in the way that they govern policy or in the way that they contain ideas and articulations that recur in various other scholarly texts, as identified, for example, through cross-referencing. In analysing the articulation of the educable child in a social economic discourse, the material used is ECEC policy produced by the OECD and the EU (OECD, 2017; European Commission, 2010). Moving on to the posthumanist discourse, a selection of significant scholarly texts addressing posthumanist theory in ECEC practice has been made (Murris, 2016; Taylor & Giugni, 2012; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). Approaching the materials, our initial readings were inspired by Bacchi’s policy analytical question: What is the problem represented to be? In both discourses the future is depicted as precarious, and together with the identified deficiencies of our time, the need for early intervention in terms of education is justified.

Expected Outcomes

Both discourses depict the future as precarious and accommodate some common fundamental articulations: the notion of the world in crisis where education is the answer and the young child, educable within the framework of the right circumstances, a potential for development and change. In the social economic discourse, the problem is represented as the threat of decline in the development of welfare, global concurrence and growth. The presented solution is to increase access and raise the level of education. Here, early intervention (e.g. early education) is held to be a key factor bringing about social levelling. Articulated in relation to this representation of the future, the child is made an entrepreneur and a problem solver. In the posthumanist discourse, the problem is represented as an ecological crisis, brought on by an unsustainable lifestyle linked to an anthropocentric worldview. The presented solution is the reconfiguration of
the human through repositioning the child within a so called flat ontology. Despite the claimed differences, both discourses risk reinforcing the idea of the child as a site for "intervention" in order to achieve political and social change. The striving to release the child from social and cultural heritage (either being regarded as disadvantageous or as founded on an oppressive humanist worldview) recurs in both discourses, detaching the child from the child's social and cultural contexts and historical past, making the young educable child an 'orphan'.

References

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