The moral regime of norm critical pedagogics – new ways of governing the Swedish pre-school child

Jonas Qvarsebo

To cite this article: Jonas Qvarsebo (2019): The moral regime of norm critical pedagogics – new ways of governing the Swedish pre-school child, Critical Studies in Education, DOI: 10.1080/17508487.2019.1596961

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1596961

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 27 Mar 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 136

View Crossmark data
The moral regime of norm critical pedagogics – new ways of governing the Swedish pre-school child

Jonas Qvarsebo

Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT
In recent years, many programs and manuals for ‘norm criticism’ have been produced for schools in Sweden. In this article, I situate norm criticism and norm critical pedagogics within discourses of values and norms, legal rights and policies through a close reading of the material produced for the Swedish pre-school. I explore the targets, modes, and techniques of governing the child through norm critical programs and practices. I give special attention to the moral regime inscribed in the norm critical project and how the desirable and undesirable subject is constructed. By problematizing norm critical pedagogics, the article propositions them (contrary to its advocates’ claims) as doing much more than widening social norms, creating tolerance for diversity, or furthering freedom and authenticity. Norm criticism attempts to reshape power relations, assert the moral authority of professionals, and produce a state-approved social subject.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 November 2018
Accepted 14 March 2019

KEYWORDS
Governmentality; education; pre-school; norm critical pedagogics

Introduction: the value foundation and new possibilities of governing the subject

Since the mid-1990s, talk about ‘the Swedish value foundation’ (den svenska värdegrunden), or simply ‘the value foundation’ (värdegrunden) has become dominant in Swedish public discourse. By now the value talk has become naturalized and taken for granted in both public and everyday speech. Whatever topic discussed – education, the migrant crisis, integration, profits in welfare, mistreatment of the elderly, or problems in the work environment – references to the value foundation abound. The values themselves are not typically Swedish or novel; they are the standard Western moral values that can be found in documents like the UN declaration of human rights: the dignity of human life, the freedom, and integrity of the individual, equal value and solidarity of all peoples, and equality between the sexes (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, Lpo94). The initial talk about the value foundation did not focus on these value commitments as such, rather the value foundation was invoked rhetorically, signaling that the speaker was on the right side of accepted moral and political borders (Qvarsebo & Axelsson, 2015). The value foundation still has this rhetorical function, but there is now a tendency to link it to the specific moral and behavioral aspirations of various pedagogical programs to shape the attitudes and conduct of people.

CONTACT
Jonas Qvarsebo
Jonas.qvarsebo@mau.se

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
The prolific talk about the value foundation has made possible a host of different strategies and programs for the development of desirable attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups. Value talk is increasingly articulated in an active way, as value foundation work (värdegrundsarbete), and makes up the content of manuals, dialogue days, group exercises and action plans within many institutions, organizations and workplaces (Qvarsebo & Axelsson, 2015). The value work revolves around methods for working with emotional intelligence, social and emotional training, deliberative dialogue training, anti-bullying strategies and methods for working against discrimination. The idea seems to be that the lofty, and quite vague, values of the value foundation should influence people’s behavior and attitudes in concrete and even measurable ways for the betterment of society.

Until quite recently, the value work in school and pre-school was associated with manuals and programs of what is called life knowledge (livskunskap). Several of these programs have been studied from critical perspectives in recent years (see, for example, Bartholdsson, Gustafsson-Lundberg, & Hultin, 2014; Dahlstedt, Fejes, & Schönning, 2011; Qvarsebo & Axelsson, 2015; von Brömssen, 2013). But from around 2010 and onwards life knowledge has been overlapped and even superseded by what is called norm criticism (normkritik), norm critical pedagogics (normkritisk pedagogik) or norm creative pedagogics (normkreativ pedagogik). The relationship and continuity between life knowledge and norm criticism are evident in that both connect with and feed off the value foundation and make use of various strategies for practical and concrete implementation of these values in educational settings, as well as in many other institutions and organizations. But they also differ in several ways; norm criticism put emphasis on widening and changing social norms viewed as oppressive, especially those surrounding gender and sexuality, while life knowledge is more concerned with addressing things such as bullying, drugs and emotional management. To date, there are very few critical studies of the programs of norm criticism. The books and articles that have been written so far – by scholars, practitioners, and activists – are mostly geared towards furthering norm criticism rather than studying it from critical perspectives (see, for example, Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Kalonaitytė, 2014. But see Langmann & Månsson, 2016 for an exception.)

A quite large number of programs, manuals, and models of norm criticism for preschool and school have been produced within just a few years. The overall objective for these programs seems to be the forming of a human subject purged and emancipated from everything that can be viewed as traditional and stereotypical pertaining to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, functionality, body, family and class. Thus, the norm critical project has a family resemblance with both historical and contemporary theories, programs and practices of emancipation, such as various forms of citizenship training, North American anti-oppression pedagogics, postcolonial theory, feminist and queer theory, and intersectional analysis. The spread of norm criticism in Sweden has also been made possible by statutes such as the Law against Discrimination and Offensive Treatment of Children and Pupils (lag om förbud mot diskriminering och annan kränkande behandling av barn och elever) (Lag 2006:67, 2006, p. 67). Based on this statue, the anti-discrimination work of pre-schools and schools has been emphasized in recent years, which has paved the way for programs and methods such as those linked to norm critical pedagogics (Englund & Englund, 2012; Langmann & Månsson, 2016).
This article is based on a close reading of norm critical literature and manuals with an emphasis on material produced for Swedish pre-schools. For analyzing the premises and objectives of norm criticism and norm critical pedagogics, I have used Janne Bromseth’s and Frida Darj’s anthology *Normkritisk pedagogik: makt, lärande och strategier för förändring* from 2010. The authors represent a blend of scholars and practitioners from the fields of gender and queer studies. I have also used organization and leadership scholar Viktorija Kalonaitytė’s monography *Normkritisk pedagogik: för den högre utbildningen* from 2014. For analyzing norm critical manuals, I have used the very influential manual *Break the norm!: Methods for studying norms in general and the heteronorm in particular* from 2009, published by The Living History Forum and The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (RFSL). I have also used Elliot Edberg’s and Ida Gulbrandsen’s method book *Tänka tillsammans: verktögsbok för normkritik och likabehandling i förskolan* from 2015, published by Antidiskrimineringsbyrån, and Karin Salmson’s and Johanna Ivarsson’s book *Normkreativitet i förskolan: om normkritik och vägar till likabehandling*, also from 2015. The last book is by far the most detailed manual for pre-school, most of the empirical examples in the article are drawn from this book. The book has been well-received among pre-school teachers and is used in many pre-schools, it is also required reading at the pre-school teacher program at Uppsala University. Salmson is a children’s book writer and gender activist and Ivarsson is a university lecturer within the field of social work.

Inspired primarily by the work of Michel Foucault, I study norm criticism as an assemblage of techniques and tactics of governing made possible by both a discourse of values and norms, and a legal discourse of rights, policies, and guidelines. Within this framework, I explore the different targets, modes, and techniques involved in governing the pre-school child in norm critical programs and practices. More specifically, I am interested in the moral regime inscribed in the norm critical project and how the desirable and undesirable subject is constructed. Methodologically, I make use of Foucauldian discourse analysis and governmentality studies. This form of analysis is not a method in the narrow sense; rather, it is a way of posing questions of texts and speech based on a theoretical understanding of discourse, power and the subject – the analytics of government – which is outlined in the theoretical section below. Broadly speaking, to analyze the general logic and rationality of the texts, identify discursive regularities, patterns, and key themes (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Certain questions about governing the subject come to the fore; such as: What is the problematic of governing, that which is questioned and should be changed? Which subjectivities seem to be desired or undesired? Through which means, or what methods and techniques, are these subjectivities to be shaped and what style of governing is involved in this? (Axelsson & Qvarsebo, 2017; Dean, 2009).

The article is arranged as follows: First is a discussion of the article’s theoretical approach, the analytics of government, followed by a comparison and justification of this theoretical perspective in relation to various forms of emancipatory research traditions closely related to norm criticism. Then follows two empirical sections where norm critical literature and manuals are studied. In the first of these, the main targets of norm critical targets of governing are highlighted and discussed and in the second section, the modes and techniques of norm critical governing are analyzed. The article ends with conclusory remarks about the analytical findings and a critical discussion of the moral regime of norm criticism.
Analytics of government

As it is used here, the ‘analytics of government’ emerged from Michel Foucault’s work on power, knowledge and the subject and was later interpreted and applied by sociologist Mitchell Dean (Dean, 2009). In contrast to conventional or classical theories of governing, those governed – such as the citizen, the worker, the school pupil, the prison inmate, the client, and the child – are not divided into passive objects without voice and active subjects who are free to speak truth to power. The conventional habit of placing persons on a spectrum from freedom to slavery has no place within the analytics of government, because the governmental rule is understood to be exercised through the production of the subject. Disciplinary institutions create active agents and manageable populations who will govern themselves in ways that are discursively and institutionally grounded (if never entirely predictable).

Foucault stressed that ‘power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1990, p. 122), thus emphasizing that power cannot be reduced to notions of structures, hierarchy or chain of command types of governing. Governmentality incorporates not only institutional and hierarchical forms of surveillance and control, but also the many practices that shape attitudes and actions. Foucault used the phrase ‘the conduct of conduct’ to theorize this dynamic of power and described it as a decentralized, recursive form of power embedded in discourse rather than exercised from a strategic point in society, like the state (Foucault, 1982, p. 2). At certain points in history and within specific contexts, certain conditions for what is viewed as true, important, good, serious, praiseworthy and so on, become naturalized and taken for granted. Foucault called these naturalized conditions ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). Since these are historically contingent and context-bound, the concept of governmentality highlights power at the level of practices and the body – the microphysics of power – rather than postulating certain a priori of transcendence and essence. This means that the focus of attention for an analytics of government is on what is said and done, ‘an empiricism of the surface’, that consists of ‘identifying the difference in what is said, how it is said, and what allows it to be said and to have an effectivity’ (Rose, 1999, p. 57).

I make use of a concept similar to ‘regimes of truth’ in this article, namely ‘regimes of morals,’ or moral regimes, which are made up of certain conditions, ideas and norms of desirable human behavior and attitudes. These regimes shape identity and action through programs like those associated with norm criticism. Truth and morals are interconnected in governing the subject, but by highlighting morals I want to direct interest to specific notions of the good and the desirable in governing practices; my focus is upon ethical politics, rather than epistemological politics. From a governmentality perspective, the pre-school is a site for a complex interplay of various forces of power and notions of the good citizen, as well as more overarching visions of the good society and the good life.

Analytics of government versus emancipatory research

If the conventional view of power rests on a dualism between freedom and slavery, this is a result of emancipatory visions that are (in the abstract) laudable. Indeed, norm critical pedagogics are rooted in a desire to emancipate those who are viewed as oppressed, discriminated or restricted by various norms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity,
race, and so on. So, why do a critical study of something as praiseworthy as this? To answer this question, we have to say more about how the analytics of government differs from research traditions where normative visions of emancipation undergird the analysis. Political scientist John S. Ransom, located the divergence in ancient Greece. At the heart of the emancipatory research tradition is an interplay between notions of what ‘is’ versus what ‘ought to be’. Normative political-philosophical thought (or later, social research) within this scheme of thinking is highly instrumental. The overarching questions are about how we ‘should’ live and who we ‘should’ become (Ransom, 1997).

According to Ransom, Foucault wanted to develop a different kind of critical analysis than the one associated with the normative political-philosophical tradition. In a lecture from 1978 entitled ‘What is critique?’, Foucault disconnected critique from various paradise visions of society (Foucault, Lotringer, & Hochroth, 1997). Instead, he highlighted the problem of power as such and the different modes of power that operate also within emancipatory visions and ideologies. According to Ransom’s interpretation, Foucauldian critical analysis takes interest in social transformation and is engaged in opening up new possibilities for thinking and being, but it does not serve specific ideological or political projects. This type of critique can be thought of as a virtue, i.e. something that has value in itself, regardless of what it can accomplish for the good of society from an ideological perspective. In Ransom’s words: ‘Criticism needs to stop being thought of as purely a means and instead it should take its place in the world as an end, as a purpose all its own’ (Ransom, 1997, p. 3).

If this way of thinking about critique is embraced, critical work becomes a much more open and complex endeavor where power can be studied in all kinds of social phenomena. In particular, critical work is not reduced to studying things that are already agreed upon as bad – social practices of oppression and exclusion – but also things that are agreed upon as good – social practices of emancipation and inclusion – since power is at work also in these things, shaping and molding people’s thoughts, attitudes, behavior and actions in specific ways (Axelsson & Qvarsebo, 2017; Cruikshank, 1999). Hence, rather than thinking about pedagogical programs and manuals as those connected with norm criticism in terms of good and bad, analytics of government is interested in the practices of governing that shape human subjectivity. By leaving normative aspects of good and bad aside, the critical analysis in this article does not seek to question the intentions, values, and ambitions of norm criticism per se, but rather to investigate the practices of governing the subject at play in norm critical pedagogics.

**Norm critical targets of governing – tradition and stereotypes**

As the name norm criticism suggests, norm critical practice revolves around socially embedded norms and how to challenge, widen or break these to further personal and collective freedom. That social norms are essential for creating community and connectedness in society is acknowledged in norm critical literature, but the emphasis of norm critical work is on how certain norms restrict people in various ways, hindering them from being themselves in regard to personal desires of being and behaving (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015). Thus, norm critical work aims at the authenticity of being and the realization of an authentic subject unhindered by oppressive norms. At the same time, norm critical work is very much about group identities, especially groups who have been marginalized because
of prevailing and oppressive norms surrounding gender, sexuality, ethnicity and bodily functioning. The emphasis of group identity and markers such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and so on links norm criticism closely with identity politics and practices of political activism aiming at giving a voice to marginalized groups in society (Eek-Karlsson, 2012).

In this first empirical section, I will discuss some of the main targets of governing through norm critical pedagogics and give some examples of how they are articulated and put into play. The purpose is not to be exhaustive and discuss every parameter of norm criticism, but to highlight the overall focus and discuss a few parameters for the sake of example. The two overarching targets for norm criticism, often repeated in the literature and manuals, are ‘traditional notions’ and ‘gender stereotypes’ (Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Nordberg & Rindå, 2009; Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015). These are often discussed within the framework of binary oppositions of what is considered ‘normal’ versus ‘deviant’ and how various socially embedded norms shape thinking and practices in everyday life (Nordberg & Rindå, 2009; Edberg, Gulbrandsen, & Stendin, 2015). To complicate, widen, or break norms in relation to these notions in order to further personal and collective freedom is the purported objective of norm criticism. In particular, gender stereotypes, under which norms of sexuality and family can be subsumed, take the forefront in the guidelines and counsel given in the literature, even if norms associated with age, ethnicity, class, religion and bodily functioning are discussed and problematized as well. At a more concrete level, what is viewed as traditional notions of gender are problematized and acted upon by correcting specific ways of speaking, acting and thinking. For instance, the common habits of using a simpler language with boys and the notion that girls prefer more calm forms of play, preferably in groups of two, are viewed as traditional modes of talking and being that should be corrected. Teachers are encouraged to be vigilant in relation to traditional and stereotypical social practices by families and their children for the purpose of opening up a greater space for freedom (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015).

The problematic norm behind traditional and stereotypical thinking in relation to boys and girls is identified as the ‘gender norm’, which is described as ‘one of the most fundamental norms’ in society but nevertheless possible to widen and change through norm critical pedagogics (Ibid.: 194). In order to widen or change the norm, the authors stress the need for early intervention, before the norms have become deeply inscribed in the thinking, attitudes, and behavior of the children, which makes the pre-school a strategic site for norm critical work. In line with this logic, pre-school teachers are viewed as key players in the effort of widening and changing oppressive norms and should, therefore, be trained in norm critical thinking and strategies for molding the children’s views of gender, sexuality and so on. In targeting the pre-school institution, which is attended by approximately 98% of children between 1 and 5 in Sweden, there is also the ambition of reaching the children’s parents and the prevailing norms in family and society. In this way ‘pre-school can be a step ahead’ to the benefit of society (Ibid.:142).

Critique of heteronormativity, which is closely related to widening the gender norm, is a recurring theme in norm critical literature and when discussed the tendency is to talk not so much about the importance of norms and values but to invoke a legal discourse of law and rights and refer to binding legislation such as the School Act and the Discrimination Act (skollagen and diskrimineringslagen). Pre-school teachers are encouraged to teach the
children about how babies are made without resorting to a traditional heterosexual discourse with man and woman as the only poles of interaction; other constellations are held up as possible, which the children should be made aware of (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015). In Normkreativitet i förskolan (Norm creativity in pre-school), Salmson & Ivarsson bemoan the meager results of years of strong emphasis on gender pedagogics in pre-school. ‘Belittling notions of gender roles’ are said to still be reproduced in spite of everything that has been done in this area (Ibid.: 196) to re-engineer gender through the schooling of the youngest Swedes. Several possible reasons for this are mentioned in the manual, one being the prevalence of heteronormative ideas among some pre-school teachers. They might secretly harbor traditional ideas of gender roles, hence are not committed to the final solution for producing gender emancipation.

Another problem pointed out by Salmson & Ivarsson is that some teachers while formally affirming the norm critical perspective still make use of the language of male and female in everyday talk. Through this gender charged language they are seen as reproducing stereotypical notions of gender differences within pre-school. The problem with using male-female language in any shape and form seems to be that children have less space of action and room for development and experimenting. There is also the risk that some children will feel uncomfortable in the gender roles they have been attributed because of their biological gender. The reproduction of binary gender roles must thus be actively worked against since they are ‘devastating for both society and the individual’ and the root of social ills like unequal pay between men and women and violence in intimate relationships (Ibid.: 196). This strategy of governing teachers everyday talk about gender is also backed up by references to the national curriculum for the pre-school. According to Salmson & Ivarsson, this means that teachers ‘have no other options’ than doing away with all traditional, binary notions of gender if the curriculum for the pre-school is to be followed (Ibid.: 197).

Despite the lingering of unemancipated ways of talking about gender roles among pre-school teachers, Salsson & Ivarsson point out that it is often parents, who do not want ‘gender gibberish’ (genustjafs) in pre-school, who pose the more apparent challenge to norm critical pedagogics (Ibid.: 197). Fortunately, according to the authors, there are also enlightened parents who share the values of norm criticism, even if these parents receive too little support from pre-school. For instance, if some parents would like to have their boy come to the pre-school wearing skirt and nail polish, he is likely to be met with a non-affirming attitude and be subject to bullying by other children. In response, pre-school teachers are supposed to support various kinds of norm-breaking behavior, so that a non-binary and indeed, the norm creative environment can flourish.

Heteronormativity and gendered language and roles of care and work within families and households are highly visible targets for norm critical work, even at the pre-school level. Samson & Ivarsson emphasize the importance of avoiding the use of words such as ‘mum’, ‘dad’ and ‘parents’ as much as possible in educational settings in order to provide a gender-neutral environment with a greater degree of freedom in relation to traditional family structures (Ibid.: 160). The traditional notions targeted in relation to family norms revolve around the mum-dad-children-configuration which is viewed as harmful and hindering human flourishing and authenticity. This intricate governing of speech involves considerable balancing by the authors who also stress that one should avoid talking about other family constellations as well, like if a child has two mothers or
two fathers. To single out such family constellations risk creating the impression that these are in some way odd and therefore can be perceived as deviant or strange in some way. The teachers are encouraged to manage their talk in ways that open up for all kinds of creative family configurations in non-discriminating ways, while at the same time steering away from traditional heterosexual family configurations.

In relation to everyday family life, the notion of the ‘nuclear family’ is specifically targeted. Practices surrounding who does what in the household, who leaves and picks up the child at pre-school, how annual feasts are celebrated and how families enjoy their Friday nights together (fredagsmys) should all be talked about in inclusive ways that open up for other ways of being and doing family than those linked to the traditional heteronormative nuclear family (Ibid.15: 163).

**Norm critical modes and techniques of governing**

In this section, I will explore how the governing of the subject is carried out at the level of specific techniques and tactics used within norm critical pedagogics. Techniques that shape the self-reflection of subjects are central to norm critical governmentality. This aims to make people more aware of the various social norms embedded in everyday practices, and thereby invite them to reflect upon whether they, themselves, are thinking and acting in emancipated ways. As for life at pre-school, virtually everything that goes on during the day is included in this type of governing: the everyday routines, social relationships and interactions, the specific words used, play, games, gatherings, indoor and outdoor activities and so on. These are all to be analyzed and reflected upon from a norm critical perspective and should lead to a heightened awareness of various norms and how these can be challenged and widened. As Nikolas Rose and Allan Miller have noted, for governing to be effective the underlying rationalities and truth claims need to be technified and instrumentalized at the level of social and bodily practices (Miller & Rose, 2008). Thus, to govern by acting on something as abstract as self-reflection, specific techniques that can operate on this capacity of the subject have to be put into operation. To these forms of concrete techniques of governing, we now turn with the help of some examples.

Pictures, toys, jigsaw puzzles and games of various sorts afford important artifacts or sites for norms to be mediated or upheld in pre-school. To aid in this endeavor, checklists and templates for gathering and compiling information are encouraged. The information gathered should then be reflected upon in subsequent gatherings with the children. As with most of the techniques of governing within norm critical pedagogics, the main targets are the traditional values and gender stereotypes discussed above. For example, Salsson & Ivarsson mention an inequality in the space allotted to girls versus boys in children’s literature. This is exacerbated by stereotypical depictions of who does what in the home, the emotions girls are encouraged to embody versus boys, and so on. It is not enough for the teachers to simply reflect on the issue of representation of gender in literature in order to come to grips with this, they should also reflect on the specific words that are being used, environments described and many other variables of social life that are portrayed in children books and that can influence the children.
One example of this mode of governing can be taken from the manual Think Together (Tänka tillsammans) where a template with various norm critical categories is presented. The categories listed are: nuclear family/star family or single-parent household; skin color: light/dark; bodily functioning: functionality according to the norm/norm-breaking functionality; body shape: thin/fat; class belonging: middle class/working class or underclass; gender: boy/girl; sexual identity: cis-person/trans-person; religion: secular Christian/believer; sexual orientation: heterosexual/homo or bisexual; age: adult/child (Tänka tillsammans: 39). No explicit normative claims are asserted about these categories, but in the contemporary Swedish context, they need none. They remind teachers that binary oppositions, by their very existence, create a field of domination between the hegemonic and the subaltern. The well-known cultural preference for and privileges granted to the nuclear family, light skin, middle class, cis-person and heterosexual, make them terms of domination – of oppressive norms. Conversely and paradoxically, the transgressive, norm-breaking terms (star family, dark skin, trans-person and homo/bisexual) emerge as potential vehicles for teachers to demonstrate their own emancipatory, progressive thinking and to produce it in their students. Based on this template the teachers are instructed to observe everything at the pre-school that can mediate norms associated with these categories, write these down and use the notes for later reflection in assigned teacher meetings. The teachers are also encouraged to work with this material together with the children to make sure that all understand the categories used in the template and to help the children to reflect on the various norms that surround the everyday practices at pre-school and how they can be challenged and widened.

These techniques help produce self-governing subjects who yearn to demonstrate self-reflection and moral enlightenment by means of their ability to move beyond ideas about marriage, skin color, class, embodiment, and sexuality that were purportedly dominant among previous generations. By definition, this is a way to make a ‘progressive’ subject. Such a large-scale project of historical imagination is visited upon the Swedish pre-school in the forms that could not be more quotidian: early readers, picture watching, playing games, and so on. Thus, nothing – no matter how small or ordinary – should be done in an unreflective manner during the school day. Everything that is said and done has an instrumental value in relation to the objectives of norm criticism.

The selection and monitoring of the literature read by and for the children at pre-schools has become an important site for this type of governing, aiming at moral enlightenment. This requires that the teachers are trained to analyze the norms that are mediated through various children’s books and to ensure that the right selection is made. But that is not enough, they must also see that the books are used to further norm critical values. In line with this, the teachers are encouraged to reflect on the stories and messages of the various books to determine if they ‘reinforce or challenge stereotypes’ (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015, p. 328). The goal is to have ‘a bookshelf that mirrors the diversity of contemporary society’ and hence pose no risk of reinforcing undesirable norms that could shape the children in wrong ways (Ibid.). To assist in this practice the authors included ‘a checklist for the bookshelf’ and a written exercise called ‘book analysis’ (Ibid.). The checklist consists of guidelines to help the teachers determine any possible stereotypes pertaining to ‘expressions and identity that cross the gender barrier’, ‘family, sexual orientation and friendship’ and ‘functionality’, ‘ethnicity.’ We also find a short description of what good literature is: ‘good books build bridges and show different ways of living and being’ (Ibid.).
Thus, the literature that the children come in contact with is supposed to have a purely instrumental function. It is not to be read for simple enjoyment, and it should not expose the children to ideas and norms that are out-of-line with the moral vision of norm criticism. The monitoring of literature also includes norm critical re-readings of popular children’s books. Perhaps, the classical German 19th century book Snow White should be remanded to the dustbin of history. After recapitulating the basic storyline of the book, Salmson & Ivarsson states in rhetoric fashion: ‘In what other context would it be ok that a man kisses a woman who is unconscious?’ (Ibid.: 138). The possibility that to a kiss a dead body was itself a transgression of the ancient taboo of ritual pollution, and therefore a sign of the power of love and life to defeat fear and death, is apparently beyond the rigid historical imagination of norm criticism. Instead, Samson & Ivarsson assume that the story of Snow White can only communicate one thing whatever the context: female sexual passivity can only be awakened by a man. From this, the authors argue, there is a straight line to the idea that ‘a female rape victim is to be blamed for the rape’ (Ibid.).

Since literature is attributed such importance and power in shaping the child, it becomes important to govern the kind of literature that is available at pre-school to prevent harmful thoughts or ideas from taking root in the minds of the children. This instrumental use of literature is also legitimized by references to ‘the democratic task’ of the pre-school institution (Ibid.: 78), hence a governing in the name of democracy and democratic values. To think and act according to norms that are viewed as traditional or stereotypical thereby becomes associated with an anti-democratic or even anti-social spirit while norm criticism is portrayed as embodying a true democratic spirit.

As shown above, at heart of the moral regime of governing at play in norm critical pedagogics is the destabilizing and reversal of traditional norms and stereotypes, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality. Ideas and practices that are traditionally attributed to boys and girls – how to dress, preferences about what and how to play and so on – are therefore to be questioned in a systematic manner. This effort to destabilize and question traditional norms is not easy, however, since the norm criticism’s own literature and governmental forms of power presumse an active and reflective child subject. This problem of engaging in the governing of thoughts and attitudes, while upholding the subject’s autonomy is portrayed as an act of balance between affirming the child’s autonomy and their resistance to norm critical ideas as something desirable, while on the other hand making sure that undesirable norms are not reproduced through the social and learning experiences of young children.

To help teachers’ creativity in relation to problems like these, Salmson & Ivarsson present a hypothetical situation where a teacher is making a drawing of a boy who is wearing a pink dress. In this situation, a child could be provoked by the drawing and claim that boys do not wear pink dresses. To handle this problem, the authors suggest a response from the teachers where it is pointed out that while it is true that not all boys wear pink dresses some do, just like all girls do not wear pink dresses but some do (Ibid.). In this way, the teachers are instructed to leave room for the children’s questions and resistance without letting the stereotypical ideas go unchallenged. This is a form of governing that targets unreflective certainies in the child and in a subtle way seeks to undermine the basis for these, without explicitly condemning them. Ideally then, in the norm critical discourse, the child’s resistance to norm critical ideals is not be corrected in an explicit way. It is to be
incorporated in the governing of the child’s attitudes by destabilizing preconceived certainties that stand in opposition to the desired norms.

Another strategy of governing related to literature is to help the teachers to perceive the difference between ‘problematizing’ versus ‘normalizing’ stories found in the children’s books, where the latter is desirable (Ibid.: 78). A problematizing story is a story where the focus of attention is on the transgression of a specific norm, like if a boy is wearing a dress or if a child has two mothers. The problem with this, according to Salmsón & Ivarsson, is that the clear transgression of a norm is easily perceived as strange or weird, and thus risks affording an opportunity for the children to conclude that non-stereotypical ideas and practices simply odd. A normalizing story, on the other hand, is a story where the focus of attention is on something else than the actual transgression of the norm, but where it still plays an important part of the story. The transgression of a specific norm can then be perceived as something perfectly natural, and the story can become an instrument to ‘widen the norm’ so that undesirable stereotypes and traditional ideas do not become part of a naturalized understanding of the order of things for the child. Through this, the child is thought to get a broader understanding of the variance of social life and can develop into a more open and inclusive person (Ibid.).

**Conclusion: the moral regime of norm criticism and the governing of the subject**

In this final section, I will summarize, discuss, and problematize the governing of the subject embedded in norm critical literature and manuals. I will start with some more general reflections of norm criticism as a project of moral reform situated in the interface between the pre-school institution, family and civil society. I will then move on to reflections on the modes and techniques of norm criticism, the moral regime it establishes and how the subject is governed. Starting with the norm critical targeting of what is deemed as traditional, norm critical pedagogics – seemingly without critical reflection – tap into a progressive historical narrative where the values and strategies of norm criticism are positioned as the height of enlightened moral reasoning. This is compared to older times, where tradition and custom have played an important role for identity and social practices. It would be quite difficult to generalize about tradition and traditional notions in this way without this progressive historical narrative in the background, even if no theory of history is explicitly acknowledged. The progressive narrative of history can be thought of as an important condition of possibility for the norm critical approach to traditional notions and values; certain unspoken ideas about the flow of history as an ever-progressive story of moral enlightenment which seems to have culminated in our day and age. From this assumed enlightened position, it is thought possible to sort between moral ideals and practices and to formulate strategies for realizing what is good and desirable in various contexts.

In targeting stereotypes of various sorts, norm criticism focuses on the everyday and often unreflective certainties that make present categories of normal and deviant possible, and from this perspective articulates strategies and tactics to deconstruct and denaturalize these. Hence, the undesirable, as it appears in norm critical literature, is either rooted in the perceived unenlightened past – the traditional – or in ideas,
attitudes and practices in the present which are taken for granted by people in general – the stereotypes. This mode of thinking makes possible a governing of the subject based on the grand narrative of a dark and gloomy past – where people were suffering under hidden and oppressive norms – and a bright and shiny future – where people have become emancipated from the past and are evolving into enlightened people beyond tradition and stereotypes. The good and desirable to be achieved through norm criticism is thus awaiting in the future and the present is articulated as the space for reflection and intervention where the future can be realized through implementing norm critical pedagogics in various institutions and society at large.

In targeting traditional notions and stereotypes, norm criticism is deeply engaged in the business of moral reform; trying to eradicate the bad and harmful and making way for the good and progressive. This kind of moral work is in a sense as old as human history; from ancient times many different religions, philosophies, ideologies, and codes of conduct have been used by authorities at various levels to realize specific moral visions in institutions like monasteries, schools, factories and society at large. In Sweden, progressive ideas of schooling have had a strong standing in educational settings since the Second World War, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the world (Qvarsebo, 2013). The attack on tradition and stereotypes is against this background a bit surprising since it assumes a context where traditional and stereotypical notions have not been addressed. What is perhaps novel in the case of norm criticism, compared to earlier programs of moral reform in school and pre-school, is that the governing of morals and behavior is carried out without acknowledging the moral nature of what goes on. The moral governing in operation presents itself primarily as a widening of norms in the name of authenticity and freedom, without acknowledging the strong moral dimension of the governing practices at play. This seemingly non-normative approach to moral reform appears in a document produced by The National Board of Education (Skolverket). Norm criticism strives not to morally reform individuals but is a way of ‘challenging dominant social categories and reflect[ing] on who is given power, is made into a subject and is given the privilege of defining problems, and who is made into an object of reform’ (Skolverket, 2009, p. 98, my translation). However, the norm critical ambition to widen or challenging norms without at the same time establishing new ones is more than highly problematic; it is an impossibility. Every pedagogical initiative to work against oppression and for the emancipation of some form will give rise to new norms and practices of what is good and bad and new forms of inclusion and exclusion, even if these come in new shapes (see Langmann & Månsson, 2016 for a similar argument).

The moral work of norm criticism pertaining to parameters such as gender, sexuality and family is articulated in terms of freedom, authenticity, and diversity in norm critical literature and manuals. However, the proclaimed freedom, authenticity and diversity does not include ideals and practices that can be labeled as traditional, stereotypical or conservative, since these are assumed to be the very things that should be problematized and abandoned. This creates a tension in norm critical pedagogics with pre-school children who come from families where, for instance, views of sexuality and gender are not seen as open, fluid and areas for experimenting and widening of norms but rather interwoven with a specific cultural or religious identity and seen as important for human flourishing. At the level of institutions and civil society, there is a parallel tension between the norm critical project and societal ideals of tolerance, diversity and pluralism, i.e. classical liberal
democratic principles. The shape and form of freedom and plurality embedded in norm criticism have been quite clear, but often unspoken; boundaries for accepted and non-accepted norms and cannot without difficulty be described as simply a widening of norms. Rather, norm criticism articulates a regime of morals that privileges certain norms and practices while excluding others. It promotes certain forms of subjectivities and attempts to deter others. From the perspective of governmentality, this tension can also be articulated in terms of moral authority, or moral governing. It situates norm criticism in power relations that link together the state, family, civil society and the individual in complex ways with effects for wider issues of tolerance, diversity, and pluralism in society.

Numerous, concrete techniques which foster the self-reflection of the subject are at the heart of on the practice of norm criticism. To this set of techniques belong the targeting of unreflective uncertainties and the moral enlightenment of the subject. Ideally, nothing should be spoken, thought or done based on customs, habit or tradition in the norm critical discourse. All social behavior and unreflective ideas should be highlighted, problematized and challenged in light of the moral vision of norm criticism. This can seem almost totalitarian, but that would be to misread both liberal governmentality and the total state. From a governmentality perspective, norm criticism can be described as a form of liberal self-governing working through the freedom of the subject, or as the management of freedoms working through consent rather than force (Walters, 2012). At the same time, this type of self-governing puts a heavy responsibility on both teachers and children to engage in constant self-reflection and efforts to change one’s attitudes, behaviors, ways of speaking, and so on. If there is a virtue in norm critical pedagogics, it is the virtue of self-examination, the constant checks on one’s social practices and the norms that possibly influence these. Except, as intimated above, that the norm critical discourse is not reflexive of its own values and preferences. And it lacks a fundamental curiosity about or sufficient knowledge of those texts, traditions, and peoples that it sees as ‘traditional.’ In place of historically situated knowledge or rigorous cultural inquiry which would rely upon very well-educated teaching professionals, norm critical pedagogics provides manual-based programs, templates, and questionnaires. These set fairly rigid parameters whereby teachers and children can assess, test and reflect on the norms they purportedly adhere to and challenge and widen these. The desirable subject at the end of this mode of governing is a self-reflecting subject who is aware of all the social norms behind behaviors, attitudes, ways of talking and interacting and who actively monitors these and strives for a new form of moral perfection. Yet, one has to wonder if (indeed) this will be the consequence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jonas Qvarsebo (PhD), Senior Lecturer in Educational Science, Department of Education and Society, Malmö University, Malmö Sweden.
References


