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Shifting feminist politics in education

Contemporary philosophical perspectives

The idea for this special issue developed during one of the yearly meetings of the *Nordic Educational Research Association* (NERA). A group of younger researchers interested in feminist and queer philosophical perspectives on education had gathered between the official network meetings and discussed the organizational division between a more narrowly defined philosophy of education, on the one hand, within the network of *The Nordic Society for Philosophy of Education* and on the other hand feminist philosophical perspectives within the networks *Gender and Education* and *Post-approaches to education*. It appeared to us that outspoken feminist and queer theoretical approaches were far more prevalent in the latter two networks whereas they were close to absent within the philosophical network. Furthermore, the fact that critical discussions of gender and sexuality in relation to education were generally perceived as important contemporary concerns was also reflected in the numbers of young researchers that the different networks attracted respectively.

As young researchers interested in feminist philosophy, we are reminded of Hannah Arendt's statement in 1964 (cf. Rebecca Adami's article in the present issue) when – in a rather ironic tone – she comments in an interview with Günter Gaus: "It is possible that one day a woman will be a philosopher". There is a long-standing and well-known feminist discussion around the implications for the discipline philosophy, including philosophy of education, having been dominated by male writers¹ and, we can add, white, heterosexual and bourgeois perspectives. In the light of the division between the networks at NERA, we wondered with Hannah Arendt whether the question of the possibility of feminist philosophy was still unanswered as of today. While many of us felt at home in the philosophical network as we appreciate the variety of traditions and the seriousness of philosophical engagement it allows for, at the same time, the relative absence of feminist perspectives left us feeling out of place and wondering whether we had to change networks in order to pursue our interests. However, the networks which provided a more obvious space for feminist and queer research and scholarship left us feeling out of place for other reasons.

1 Schumann, C./ Adami, R., Feminism and Education. In: Stone, L. (Ed.): *Interdisciplinary Handbooks Philosophy* (in print).

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The majority of presentations in the *Gender and Education* network had a stronger focus on concrete empirical research questions, even if informed by feminist philosophy and theory. In the network *Post-approaches to education* more theory-driven papers were presented. Nevertheless, in our informal meeting in-between the networks, we discussed whether this left out many feminist philosophies which could not be neatly placed within the so-called “post-perspectives,” such as, for example, feminists inspired by phenomenological, post-colonial, pragmatist, Hegelian-Marxist, Wittgensteinian, and Arendtian traditions.

As a result of these reflections, we organized a session on “The politics of gender in education” during the NERA Conference 2017 within the network of philosophy of education, in this way insisting on a place for diverse feminist philosophical approaches to be explored *in* philosophy and *as* philosophy. Some of us had experienced that this is possible in the yearly meetings of the British group “Women in philosophy of education” supported by funding from the *Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* (PESGB). This group had been formed on behalf of some female philosophers’ activism in order to contribute to countering the gender inequality. In Arendt’s spirit, they worked for turning her ironic remark “It is possible that one day a woman will be a philosopher” into a historical oddity. When we organized the symposium for NERA 2017, we were inspired by the British group’s work; we understood it as one step forward for us to create such important spaces within philosophy of education in a Nordic context as well.

The present special issue has emerged as a consequence of the NERA 2017 symposium. It is an attempt to be both witness and an active contribution to the shifting feminist politics within the field of philosophy of education and its consequences for thinking education. With specific emphasis on the political dimensions, preconditions and implications of questions of gender and sexuality in philosophy of education, we aim to take into account previous work within the field, raising topics such as ethics of care, relationality, and embodiment,² while at the same time extending the on-going discussions within the area. It was of special concern to us to bring into focus how the gendered and sexualized body becomes politicized in education by including post-colonial and queer philosophical perspectives and by moving beyond the binaries female/male, femininity/masculinity. In relation to the Nordic context, this special issue tries to put posthumanist and new materialist feminist perspectives in dialogue with other feminist approaches, in this way extending the work of authors like Hillevi Lenz-Taguchi³ in the Nordic countries.

2 Cf. for example: Todd, Sharon/ones, Rachel/ O’Donnell, Aislinn (2016): Shifting education’s philosophical imaginaries. Relations, affects, bodies, materialities, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1134860>; Griffiths, Morwenna/ Hoveid, Marit Honerod/ Todd, Sharon/ Winter, Christine (2015): Re-Imagining Relationships in Education. Ethics, Politics and Practices, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118944707>.

3 Cf. for example: Lenz-Taguchi, Hillevi (2017): “This Is Not a Photograph of a Fetus”. A Feminist Reconfiguration of the Concept of Posthumanism as the Ultrasound fetus image, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23/9, pp. 699-710, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417732644>.

The first article by Karin Gunnarsson and Simon Ceder explores the phenomenon of touch in educational practice from a posthumanist feminist perspective, arguing that touch is often pre-supposed without further theorization in educational research. By challenging a subject-centered, anthropocentric understanding, they develop a posthuman notion of touch as continuously present, with multiple orientations, and in relational intra-action. Gunnarsson and Ceder emphasize two particularly important aspects in the relation between touch, education and posthumanist feminism, namely, body and nature-culture, and also critically discuss some challenges that posthumanist feminism poses in general as well as in the specific case of theorizing the phenomenon of touch.

In a feminist perspective drawing on Hannah Arendt and Grace Jantzen, Lovisa Bergdahl's article investigates the 'language of crisis' employed in educational discourse. As a patriarchal invention rooted in a specific understanding of temporality, this language draws on images and metaphors related to war and violence, justifying politicians and reformers to "pull into schools with 'heavy artillery', initiating by force yet another far-reaching policy reform." Drawing on Hannah Arendt's notion of natality and birth, Bergdahl explores what a different root metaphor for a language of education could offer. Rather than a simple shift from the language of death and crisis in the West towards natality and birth, she suggests that it would allow addressing the tension *between* continuation and renewal, past and future, death (of the old) and birth (of the new).

In a similar vein to Lovisa Bergdahl's demonstration of the way in which the "language of crisis" can be transformed with Arendt and Jantzen, Aislinn O'Donnell sheds critical light on the prevalent language of "skills talk" and its consequences for educational practices with the help of alternative feminist materialist visions. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Isabelle Stengers, Susan Oyama and Elizabeth Grosz, O'Donnell seeks to counter the de-materialising turn to generic skills talk that has affected contemporary discourses and practices of education (and work) with a perspective which draws attention to what she calls, material thinking, a "pluralistic, emergent and attenuated approach to thinking." She privileges sustained engagement and intimacy with concrete subject matter to counter discourses of generic skills, and indeed the wider shift to algorithmic governance, and to retrieve a sense of the common world.

In Rebecca Adami's article, Hannah Arendt's thought also has a central place. The argument starts from the ambivalence in Hannah Arendt's and Simone de Beauvoir's positioning in relation to philosophy. Re-reading Arendt's political theory on appearance in the public through a feminist lens, she problematizes issues of representation and the possibility of political action. Drawing on Bonnie Honig's (1995) agonistic interpretation of Arendt as well as Clare Hemming's (2012) reflections on affective solidarity, Adami discusses "the impossibility for 'female' philosophers to ignore identity politics in the public reception of their work."

Continuing the question of what can appear in public and how, Marie Hållander's article gives a feminist and postcolonial critique of Giorgio Agamben's concept of "profanation". How do objects in educational situations that are profaned, that is, "placed on the

table” in order to be “played with,” become usable as public goods? And how do different bodies inhabit the public school? Hållander pushes earlier analyses by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons further. While agreeing with their defence of the public school as a place for “free play” against maxims of productivity and effectiveness, she critically questions whether social and cultural aspects can equally be suspended; rather we live them, from within. With the help of Sara Ahmed, the article explores the act of profanation in cases of representations of social injustice and suffering in teaching.

In Claudia Schumann’s article, Sara Ahmed’s work is put into dialogue with the post-humanist feminist perspective, focusing on the respective understanding of critique. Her article takes as a point of departure the recurring experiences of happiness, relief, irritation and frustration while teaching on diversity in a Swedish school leadership program. These affective responses are related to the theoretical debate between different feminist perspectives which defend a more negative (paranoid) mode of critique on the one hand, or a more affirmative (reparative) one on the other. Rather than opening new binaries, Schumann argues that we should multiply our modes of critique in a Baradian, diffractive spirit.

The present issue, as indicated in the title, may be understood as a contribution to further shifting feminist politics in philosophy of education. Of course, this issue can by no means be understood as comprehensive or even representative of the vast amount of work that is being done in the field of feminist philosophy in all the different areas of educational research. Rather, we have collected contributions by a variety of researchers that position themselves in the field of philosophy of education and are in different ways inspired by feminist philosophers. We hope this issue will contribute to continuing and intensifying the feminist conversation both within the philosophical network and between and across the different networks, leading to a transformation and further possibilities for network-overlapping collaboration and dialogue.