

## Self-Evident, Excessive or Opposed: Student Teachers' Associations with 'Gender Equality'

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**Abstract.** This is a qualitative study undertaken in a Swedish teacher education setting. The aim is to obtain data that can be helpful for teacher educators planning their teaching about gender equality policy. The assumptions which the students base their pre-understandings on are in focus. The empirical material consists of 105 student teachers' descriptions of their associations with the term 'gender equality' [jämsällldhet]. In the material, three competing discourses are found. One discourse is the *discourse of the fair gender equality*. Within this discourse, gender equality seems to be quite an uncomplicated issue. Gender equality is, or should be, something natural. A second discourse is the *discourse of the exaggerated gender equality*, linking gender equality to conflicts, aggression and excessive demands. A third discourse is the *discourse of the opposed gender equality*. Within this discourse, gender equality is described as a contested issue met with resistance and hostility. Being able to identify and examine these competing discourses may work as a first step in identifying assumptions that students hold about gender equality and gender issues.

**Keywords:** gender equality, gender issues, teacher education, student teachers, discourses

### Introduction

In the present paper, I examine a group of student teachers' pre-understandings that can be linked to gender equality. This is done through a discursive analysis of student teachers' associations with the term gender equality. Many countries have gender equality policies in education. In European Union policy teachers are given the task of challenging gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles (Eurodice 2010). This means in turn that student teachers need to be prepared for this job, something that has not always worked so well. As Frånberg (2010) points out, it requires a lot of knowledge and skills to challenge established practices and mindset (cf. Bondestam 2010). Researchers have highlighted shortcomings in how gender and gender equality issues have been addressed in teacher education (Hedlin & Åberg 2012; Lahelma 2014). The right competence to address the issues has not always been available (Malmgren & Weiner 2001; Skelton 2007; Younger 2007). Younger and Warrington (2008) talk about a

gender invisible within teacher training in the UK. Also, gender and teacher education have long been an under researched field (Skelton 2007). This might be due both to notions concerning gender being unreflected and to a widespread belief that gender inequality no longer is a problem. Peace (2003), for instance, describes British students as associating gender inequality with past times. And Brodie (2008) argues that gender politics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been displaced and marginalized in contemporary Canadian politics. Instead, 'we are all equal now' is a stance. In British, Canadian as well as in Australian contexts, the individual is focused on in a way that implies that gender no longer is an issue (Walkerdine 2003; Ringrose 2007; Brodie 2008; Romack 2011). This is in line with a belief that women and men no longer meet gender-specific expectations. McRobbie (2010) refers to this as the claim of post-feminism. Nevertheless, student teachers at their placement schools have to deal with gendered expectations. According to Braun (2011), not being prepared for this may lead to the decision to drop out of the training. Thus there is reason to give gender issues more attention in teacher education.

When it comes to gender equality, the Nordic countries are often described as prominent in the field. Brunila and Edström (2013) even call gender equality 'a clear Nordic trademark' (p. 309). However, the Nordic teacher trainings have been criticized in a similar manner as in other countries. Regarding the Finnish teacher education, a reluctance to address gender issues has been reported. According to Lahelma (2011), this is partly due to the view that gender issues are no longer relevant. There is a claim that gender patterns virtually no longer exist in Finnish society; gender equality is already achieved. Parallel with this view is a widespread belief that the gender patterns that still can be observed depend on biological differences that neither can nor should be challenged. Studies from Iceland show similar results. Gudbjörnsdóttir (2012; 2014) found shortcomings concerning Icelandic teacher educators and the student teachers' basic knowledge needed to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes and incorrect notions of unchangeable gender differences. Sweden was early to formulate a gender equality policy in the curriculum for its nine-year compulsory schools [for children aged 7-16]; this was done in the late 1960s. Yet, Swedish teacher education has, as well, been criticized for flaws when it comes to preparing prospective teachers in their task. The training has been criticized for not connecting to the knowledge and research in this area. Issues relating to gender and gender equality too often have been discussed in an "everyday talk" manner (Havung 2006; Erixon Arreman & Weiner 2007).

Pre-understandings based on common sense are often contradictory and may include many misunderstandings. As Toohey (2002) points out, teachers would benefit from identifying their students' prior knowledge more often before they plan their teaching. If the teacher is aware of students' prior knowledge and the assumptions it is based on, the opportunity to pursue an education that reaches the intended target will increase. The task of the teacher should therefore be to examine the students' pre-understandings, so that teaching can be planned accordingly.

### **This study**

The overall aim of this study is to obtain basic data that can be of help to educators during teacher education when addressing gender equality issues.

The research questions that guide the study are:

- What discourses recur in Swedish student teachers' associations with gender equality?
- What assumptions do these discourses hold?

The discourse concept draws on social constructionism, which emphasizes that we cannot experience and construct knowledge of the world around us in any other way than through the concepts, categories and languages we already have. Our knowledge of the world will, therefore, always depend on the time and culture in which we live. Discourses are 'socially constructed systems of meaning that could have been different' (Jørgensen & Phillips 2000 p. 28).

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) emphasize the constituting dimension of language. Language is structured in patterns (discourses) that are both preserved and changed as we use it. The premise is that our social world is discursively constructed in a certain way, and that we need some order to orient ourselves in life; at the same time, however, society and the social world could have been constructed differently, in other ways. Some descriptions and meanings are established, while the options are neglected or not even recognized as alternatives.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, there is an ongoing *discursive struggle* in which various social forces, such as political groups, are trying to make an impact on definitions of certain concepts. They try to spread their discourse, their special way of describing an issue or a problem. Some discourses may be relatively fixed at certain historical moments. They are considered self-evident and are therefore not questioned, even though only temporarily. There is always some kind of ambiguity or contradiction. Even well-established discourses are contrary to other discourses, which constitute reality in other ways, and therefore threaten to undermine them. The concept *floating signifier* is used for a concept that various discourses attempt to define in their own specific way (Laclau & Mouffe 2001; Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). The discursive struggle thus concerns the associations and meaning to be attributed to a particular floating signifier. In this study, gender equality is the floating signifier that is in focus.

Not unlike Laclau and Mouffe, Bakhtin (1999) also describes language as a place where there are ongoing social conflicts. He talks about the dynamic diversity of voices that language carries. The past, present and future, as well as various ideological groups, are represented in language. According to Bakhtin, the statements that are made are filled with *dialogic overtones*. This means that every statement, every opinion, is connected with previous statements. The words that the speaker uses when expressing something, are not just the speaker's own words. They are also the words of others, in the sense that they hold echoes and

reverberations of others' utterances. New statements confirm, contradict, take off from, and require previous statements within the field. Every opinion is thus in some sense to be seen as a response to other opinions. Those who speak can thus simultaneously be considered responding. This is because the view expressed not only presupposes an existing language, but also presupposes previously stated connected utterances. A given statement can be considered as a link in a chain of other statements in the area, by building on them, going into polemics with them and so on. Bakhtin writes: 'Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances' (Bakhtin 1999, p. 124).

In Sweden gender equality was established as a political field in the 1970s, and by now it is something that all Swedes have to relate to. It also means that anyone who discusses gender equality issues engages in a discussion that has been going on for some decades (Florin & Nilsson, 1999; Kjellberg 2013).

In this study, the empirical material consists of a single-question questionnaire. An invitation to take part in the questionnaire in the spring semester of 2014 was made to 109 student teachers. It was emphasized that participation was completely voluntary, and four students declined participation. Thus, there were 105 students who took part in the study. Of these, 73 were women and 27 were men. The vast majority were born between 1990 and 1994, and thus were 20-24 years of age when the study was carried out. According to other studies, both Swedish men and women in this age group state that they are in favour of gender equality (SOU 2014:6). Nevertheless, it may be noted that in this study no comparison between women's and men's responses is made.

The students were doing their second semester in teacher education, training to be primary school teachers. They had not had any courses addressing gender equality in their education. However, as gender equality is an often used concept as well as a recurring issue in Swedish societal discussions (Kjellberg 2013), the students were expected to be familiar with the concept. In the questionnaire, the students were given the task of freely writing down the associations that 'gender equality' raises. It should be emphasized that it is the discourses that can be interpreted in the students' answers that are in focus. The analysis focusing on the discourses means that the students, their backgrounds and motives, are not within the focus of this study.

By reading the material repeatedly and searching for both similarities and differences in the students' answers, three discourses were interpreted (Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). They were the *discourse of the fair gender equality*, the *discourse of the exaggerated gender equality* and the *discourse of the opposed gender equality*.

### **Three gender equality discourses**

Below, the three discourses that were interpreted in the material are presented. Both the discourse of the fair gender equality and the discourse of the

exaggerated gender equality are salient in the material. The discourse of the opposed gender equality takes a less prominent place in the data.

### *The discourse of the fair gender equality*

When gender equality is studied as a floating signifier, one of the meanings recurring in the material is that gender equality is about justice and at the same time it is, or should be, something self-evident. I have called this way of looking at gender equality the discourse of the fair gender equality. Within this discourse, gender equality is described as something uncomplicated. Phrase-like definitions are prominent. Gender equality is a matter of fairness, and a person's gender should not be of any importance. Or, as one student put it: 'We shall all be treated equally. Focus shall be on who you are as a person and not on your gender.' 'Equally' and 'same' are words that recur frequently. Yet another student who repeats the word 'same' makes the following associations with the term gender equality: 'The same conditions regardless of gender. The same expectations regardless of gender.' Another student writes: 'Gender equality: that men and women are of equal worth and are treated in the same way.' An additional example is: 'We are all of equal worth. We all have equal influence regardless of gender.'

The quotes connect to the official Swedish definition formulated in the 1980s: that gender equality means that women and men have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities to have a job that provides economic independence, to care for their children and their home, and to participate in political and social activities. A fourth area that was added in the 2000s is about gender-related violence. The objective is to stop men's violence against women (Gustafsson & Kolam 2008). Of the four areas, work, family life, social life and gender-related violence, two areas are found frequently when the arguments are more concrete. The two areas are work and family life.

### *Working life in focus*

Concerning working life, the salary issue is a frequent theme. Sometimes it is just stated that pay should be the same for men and women without this being further developed. For example, an informant writes: 'Everyone, regardless of gender, within an occupation is entitled to the same pay.' Others suggest that it is women who fall short and receive lower pay than men. A student writes that the information about women being subject to salary discrimination comes from the media. The information seems somewhat uncertain, but the student says that it has been in the newspaper, which can be interpreted as a way to support an uncertain statement:

'Concerning gender equality, a lot has changed compared with past times. Women have more of a say now. But salaries? Women still receive lower salaries than men. This is something I read in the newspaper about a year ago.'

Whether it really is true that women and men have different conditions in the job market may also be doubted:

‘There’s often a lot of discussion concerning men having higher positions than women, as well as higher salaries than women. It need not always be so, but it’s often what I hear in discussions anyway. For it to be gender equal according to me, there must be the same requirements for men and women, which I believe that it is in most places.’

In the quote above, the student maintains hearing certain things in discussions. The wording suggests that the student does not participate actively in these arguments, but even those who do not participate have to relate to significant discussions. Bakhtin (1999) talks of dialogic overtones, meaning that utterances are products of dialogues with others. In this case, what is said in the discussions is doubted; nevertheless, the student mentions it and relates to it.

#### *Family life in focus*

When family life is discussed, it is stated that women and men should be equally responsible for the care of children and for household chores. Gender equality is understood as cooperation: ‘Gender equality for me is cooperation, for instance in the home. If I am preparing dinner, my boyfriend takes the laundry or the kids. The work in the household is evenly shared.’ A student clarifies that this means that chores should not be split so that women perform certain chores and men others: ‘In a family living together, the standard family with woman and man, all work in the household is shared. Nothing is called ‘women’s tasks’ or ‘men’s work’.’

If it really were the case that no chores were called women’s tasks and men’s work, this remark would be superfluous. This statement may rather be interpreted as a way of relating to an unwanted division of chores by gender.

The above discourse of the fair gender equality, in which gender equality is regarded as something that is, or should be, uncontroversial, is contrasted by a different description, in which gender equality is associated with excesses and absurdities. This discourse will be discussed below.

#### *The discourse of the exaggerated gender equality*

Within this discourse, gender equality is associated with aggression towards men, excesses and absurdities, and demands for gender neutrality.

#### *Aggression against men*

Gender equality is associated with feminists, which in turn are connected to aggressiveness and conflict. In this context, a student talks of ‘ultra-feminists’. Another respondent refers to ‘militant feminists who claim that women are best.’ A third student refers to feminists who try to obtain advantages, women who have their own gain in focus when trying to get influence in society. The student writes:

‘No one should get benefits because they happen to have one gender or the other. [...] Further, my opinion is that the concept of gender equality for many is associated with feminists. Many feminists think

that women should improve their situation in society for their own benefit, instead of achieving gender equality.'

The quote above suggests that the word feminist has a particularly negative charge, which has been discussed by researchers (McRobbie 2010; Kolam 2014). A student claims that there is a kind of feminism that seeks to offend men. By highlighting this aggressive feminism and then rejecting it, the student's own attitude appears to be reasonable even though it is not described. The student's own vision is contrasted to 'ninja feminism, the desire to oppress men.' Another student talks about 'some' who are even more belligerent:

'In my opinion, the focus is on the wrong matters; instead of increasing the status of women, some rather wish to chop off men at their ankles. For me, gender equality rather is that men and women have the same opportunities.'

Yet another student maintains that women in a calculating way may refer to discrimination in order to get advantages: 'Gender equality issues may lead to misuse and fighting; women may take the opportunity to claim that there is some gender inequality just because they were discriminated against in the past.' Here gender discrimination is described as a historical phenomenon, something that is no longer relevant. An image of Swedish society as gender equal is thus put forward (cf. McRobbie 2010). Women who improperly refer to gender discrimination are met, however, by resistance as described in the quote. Their behaviour leads to disputes.

#### *Excesses and absurdities*

Further, within this discourse there is a talk of 'the torment for the same for everyone', which is regarded as exaggerated. Those who associated gender equality with exaggerations, however, themselves use some ample exaggerations in their arguments. 'Everyone' is made out as talking about gender equality 'everywhere'. One student writes:

'Everyone says that everything should be gender equal everywhere. But it's impossible to get everything gender equal when everyone has different makings. Why does everyone want to be gender equal?'

It is not only the talk and the wish for gender equality that is described as something that has gone too far; gender equality itself has gone too far. In one answer, it is suggested that those who are in favour of gender equality maintain that everyone should think the same. That those approving of gender equality have unreasonable expectations is thus expressed. In addition, it is argued that 'everything' is about gender equality: 'The word itself has become tedious; everything is supposed to be about gender equality, but it cannot be. People in our world are too different to think the same.'

#### *Demands for gender neutrality*

Gender equality is also associated with women and men not being allowed to do as they wish. According to the reasoning of one student, gender equality is

associated with gender disappearing, that 'gender should be wiped away, everyone becomes hen'. The word 'hen' refers to a new Swedish word that has been actively discussed in the media. Hen is a pronoun that can be used generically, rather than saying 'he or she', 'she/he' or the formal-sounding 'the person concerned'. Hen may also be used for someone whose gender one does not know or if gender is irrelevant. In 2012, both books and magazines where the pronoun hen was used were published. Many of those who advocated the use of hen wanted to challenge the gender norms that language holds. This questioning led in turn others to raise their voices and protest against the launched hen-word, which was called ridiculous. The advocates were seen as excessive gender-equality zealots. The debate was very polarized (Milles 2013).

A student expresses a wording that clearly shows that the hen-word symbolizes an unwelcome attempt to challenge the gender patterns that the school's gender equality policy in fact targets. The student seems to fear that the hen-word will lead to women and men being abolished as categories, that they will be replaced by a single gender, the hen-gender. The student writes: 'There should be two different sexes. Women are women; men are men. There is no such thing as hen.' In an answer from a student, it is stated that 'our differences should be accepted;' this in turn is associated with girls not being allowed to wear dresses. According to the student behind the wording, there is a demand for gender neutrality, which means that girls' dresses are not accepted:

'People can look askance if a girl always wears pink dresses. Everything should be so neutral nowadays! There is no limit anymore. Of course girls must be allowed to wear green/blue pants, but girls with dresses must also be accepted!!'

As the quote above shows, a resistance against a maintained widespread demand for gender neutrality is expressed. This opposition is also emotional; both single and double exclamation points are used.

Even within this discourse, work and family are recurring areas of commentary, as presented below.

#### *Working life in focus*

Many students mention gender quotas in employment, something to which they are opposed. A student writes: 'For me gender equality is associated with gender quotas at workplaces. But I think it is a bit strange. The most qualified should get the job; their gender should not be either advantage or disadvantage.' Others associate gender quotas with 'nagging', and with this choice of words their negative associations are accentuated. Someone writes: 'That nagging about quotas for women and men in different positions/situations and professions only for it to look good on paper helps no one. Put more focus on the individual.' In this case, quotas are associated with both women and men getting precedence. One respondent expresses, however, that it is women who get priority. The association with gender equality is formulated as follows:

'When women are the subject of gender quotas at various workplaces [it is] because there is a majority of men.'

One student associates women's work with part-time work, a matter that has been much discussed in Sweden in recent years. For Swedish mothers, it is common to work part-time (Nyberg, 2013). The major disadvantages part-time work brings in the form of low sickness benefits, low pensions and so on, have been given considerable media attention. In the debate, part-time work has been described as a trap for women (Lomberg 2012). The student's associations may be interpreted as a reaction and a response to this discussion (cf. Bakhtin 1999). The student writes that gender equality is associated with: 'Women who choose to work less are getting attacked because they do not work, and use their 'new' freedom to the maximum.'

#### *Family life in focus*

Another student gives voice to the resistance against the proposition to individualize Swedish parental leave. In the current design, the days that provide financial compensation are divided equally between the father and the mother, but with the possibility for one parent to transfer most of their days on to the partner. In practice, most fathers transfer a large part of their parental leave to the mothers (Haas & Hwang, 2008). For a long time it has been suggested that the parental leave should be individualized, and thus organized in the same way as the general social security system. The alternative for fathers to transfer their days to the mothers would thus cease, which is assumed to lead to the fathers staying home with their children to a much greater extent (Klinth 2013). The student suggests that it is desirable that both parents take parental leave, but how the division and distribution of days is to be undertaken should be up to parents to decide. The associations with gender equality are connected to the proposed individualization of the parental insurance, something that the student sees negatively. The association with gender equality is formulated as follows: 'For parental leave to be shared and that there was an issue about it being equally divided. (Thus a bill saying it must be split. Of course it should be shared in some way, but you ought to be allowed to choose for yourself how this will be done).'

An example of how gender equality is associated with household chores is given when a student advocates that women and men share the chores, but nevertheless points out that women do not have to change half of the car tyres. The student writes:

'Gender equality in a traditional couple (man-woman) works when both of them have the opportunity to do both female and male chores. But that does not mean that because changing tyres is a male task and the man likes to do it, the woman has to change two of the tyres for the situation to be gender equal.'

When bringing up a woman having to change two car tyres, the student describes a division of tasks that seems rather caricatured, even ridiculous, and

then rejects it. In that way one's own posture appears as reasonable even though it is not very specifically expressed.

A third discourse, which has a marginal space but can be seen in the material, is the discourse of the opposed gender equality. This discourse will be discussed below.

### *The discourse of the opposed gender equality*

Within this discourse gender equality is not seen as something self-evident and uncomplicated. Neither is gender equality associated with excessive demands. Instead gender equality is described by some students as an issue they themselves are engaged in, and they have experienced a strong resistance towards it. One student says that gender equality is associated with something extreme even though it is a matter of human equality. In this way, it becomes clear that the reasoning expressed within this discourse relates to, and can be considered in response to, the discourse of the exaggerated gender equality. The student writes: 'It has become negatively charged to be pro gender equality; they say feminists carry it too far. But this is not the case. Being a feminist and fighting for gender equality is fighting for human equality regardless of gender.'

In a similar vein, another student describes how feminists are met with negativity: 'I work at a women's shelter and I am a feminist. I am often told that feminists just want power, when in fact it is gender equality we strive for. [...] As a feminist, I often get unfair criticism, which I think is due to ignorance and fear.'

According to yet another student, discussing gender equality issues is demanding. Gender equality ought to be a fairly uncontroversial matter, but instead it is very emotionally charged. The student writes:

'Asking for a gender-equal society is not really asking too much, but if you are a woman and you say such things, automatically you need to have a wide supply of arguments to defend yourself and your opinions. I believe that gender equality issues are the largest and most emotionally charged issues we have today, and that is why it is so demanding to discuss them.'

### **Conclusion**

Three different discourses have been interpreted based on a study of gender equality as a floating signifier. The three discourses can be understood as competing ways of describing the surrounding world. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) speak of discursive struggles where different ways of describing the world are in conflict. The discursive struggles in this material are both about the degree of equality in society and whether gender equality should be associated with consensus or conflict. By highlighting the discourses and their different assumptions, they may be subject to critical examination.

It is clear that the three discourses are based on completely different assumptions regarding whether Swedish women and men live under equal conditions. The Swedish gender equality policy is directed towards the areas of working life, family, influence in society, and gender-based violence. Within these areas there are plenty of statistics and research that can be used to bring clarity as to whether Swedish society is gender unequal, gender equal or if it even has gone so far that men should feel physically threatened by women. Since 2012, the Statistics Sweden website has had gender statistics that are linked to the gender equality objectives. The statistics are extensive and updated twice annually (SCB 2014; See also the Nordic Council of Ministers 2015). The students in this study present many opinions, opinions which deserve to be highlighted and compared with the knowledge available.

The second assumption which is in the centre of the discursive struggle, whether the issue of gender equality should be associated with consensus or conflict, cannot as easily be examined with the help of statistics. It can, however, be discussed and related to research in the area. Within the discourse of the fair gender equality, gender equality appears as a relatively uncomplicated objective. To a large extent, gender equality seems a conflict-free issue. A conflict dimension is, however, clear in both the discourse about the exaggerated gender equality and the discourse of the opposed gender equality. Within the discourse of the exaggerated gender equality, feminism is connected to women with excessive demands and aggression towards men (cf. Wahl et al. 2008; Kolam 2014; Kimmel 2010). This may be surprising given that feminism in Sweden can be associated with political measures and policies for which there is a broad consensus among the political parties. Since a number of party leaders in 2004 declared that they were feminists, the parties' feminist claims are recurrently highlighted in the political debate. Leading politicians, both men and women, call themselves feminists, and most of the parties in the Swedish parliament represent themselves as feminists (Asker, 2004; Alnevall 2009). In addition, almost half the population (47%) in Sweden state that they are feminists (TT 2014). Despite this broad backing for feminism, paradoxically negative associations recur among the students. In this way, the discourse is obviously also in conflict with the discourse of the fair gender equality (cf. Bakhtin 1999).

Within the discourse of the exaggerated gender equality, feminists are described as women who do not represent the right kind of femininity norms. Feminists are described as extremists, aggressive and selfish, with their own benefits in focus. Based on Bakhtin's (1999) discussion of how contemporary debates hold ideas and notions from the past, this discourse may be interpreted as being based on traditional femininity norms saying that women should stand back for the benefit of others. Historically, women and femininity have been connected to a self-sacrificing ideal; women would primarily put others' needs first (Johnson et al. 2005). Women who differ from this ideal too clearly can still expect to be punished socially; they risk being seen as unfeminine and self-centred (Skeggs 1997; Jackson & Tinkler 2007).

Quite strong exaggerations are being used in the discourse on the exaggerated gender equality. 'Everything' is about gender equality, as one student maintains.

Gender equality is associated with excessive and also ridiculous claims. A caricatured picture of gender equality in a relationship is presented; the woman and the man seem to be forced to change two tyres on the car each to be regarded as gender equal. Even in this way, a situation where gender equality has gone too far is depicted; the situation has become absurd. In a study by Kjellberg (2013), similar situations are described. In that study informants say that you should not have to 'wash every other plate' or 'tick' how many times you change your children's diapers. In that way, it is conveyed that the speakers themselves have a reasonable attitude. The couple does some sharing of household tasks and it seems good enough, even if the division of tasks might be uneven in terms of time and content. Also, in a study by Magnusson (2006), the informants highlight extreme cases and distance themselves in a similar way. By highlighting negative examples of excessive accuracy concerning the division of household chores (so-called millimetre justice), the one who strives for a more just division of chores is depicted in a negative light and presented as silly.

The discourse of the opposed gender equality can be interpreted as a direct response to the discourse of the exaggerated gender equality. Within this discourse it is described how feminism is associated with excesses and egoism, which is said to be completely untrue. With this, Bakhtin's (1999) discussion of dialogic overtones is illustrated. Users of the discourse of the opposed gender equality are forced to relate to the discourse of the exaggerated gender equality. As much as its claims are said to be untrue, it cannot be ignored. Further, the hostility directed at feminists may be interpreted as an illustration of Sara Ahmed's (2010) *feminist killjoy*. Ahmed uses the concept to describe how feminists disrupt others' good feelings of contentment by pointing out sexism that others do not want to see.

In this study, the aim was to obtain data that could be helpful for teacher educators planning their teaching about gender equality policy. To be able to challenge our students' everyday assumptions and beliefs the importance of making formative assessments in education has been emphasized (Evans 2013). This study can be considered as a formative assessment of the knowledge concerning gender equality and gender issues within a group of Swedish student teachers. To discuss the different understandings and discourses with the students may be one way to show them the complexity of the issue.

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