

## A Focus on Critical Thinking or Linguistic Features?

*Researching Swedish Upper Secondary Teachers' Attitudes on and Use of Critical Perspectives in the Teaching of Literature in the Subject of English*



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## **Abstract**

The aim of the study is to research upper secondary teachers' attitudes towards, and use of, critical perspectives in teaching literature in the subject of English in Sweden. This is done in relation to the inequality issues identified in the Swedish school context, the Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School and the syllabi for English, along with a theoretical framework based on the of concepts of critical pedagogy and critical theory. The feminist, Marxist and post-colonial critical perspectives, that deal with power aspects were examined in greater detail, and contrasted with reader-response, structuralist and psychoanalytic criticism. This subject is examined through the use of a dual method, including a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The participants were all certified English teachers working in Upper Secondary Schools in the Helsingborg and Lund region. Some key findings are that teachers use critical perspectives to a much greater extent than was expected, and that by using critical pedagogy and critical perspectives, teachers express that they can cover many of the requirements in the regulatory documents, such as addressing injustice issues and promote critical thinking skills, while enhancing students' vocabulary and making them engage in discussions on important topics. The results also show that the participants' prior teacher education plays an important role in teachers' use of critical perspectives in their own practice.

**Keywords:** The Swedish National Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School, critical pedagogy, critical theory, literature, teacher attitudes.

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## Introduction

There is a strong emphasis on equality in the Swedish school's regulatory documents. It is clearly stated that the school should foster citizens with democratic values and well developed critical thinking skills, along with core content knowledge in subjects such as English (Skolverket, 2011). These are goals that everyone should be given the chance to reach, but paradoxically, a preamble called "The educational dilemma – Democratic ideals and otherisational practice" (SOU, 2006, my translation) shows that "education in some instances counteract its purpose of including every citizen in society forming and democratic processes, and instead reproduce the existing inequalities between different groups" (p.4, my translation). Many theorists and researchers recognise inequality issues such as this in schools around the world, and propose working with critical pedagogy as a way of countering these problems, while at the same time teaching content knowledge (in this case English) in a relevant and effective way (Appleman, 2015; Beyer, 2001; Janks, 2013; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012; Lozic, 2014). This study focuses on the teaching of literature, a core content in the syllabi for English, as it is identified as particularly suitable for applying critical perspectives (Gibson & Parks, 2014; Appleman, 2009; Beach et al., 2011; Hall, 2015).

It is also the case that some researchers have identified the need for more research on teacher's approaches to literature in the English as a foreign language classroom, especially in high school, since most studies examine university contexts (Paran, 2008 p. 490), and Young (2009, p.165) further argues that research "has not sufficiently examined the beliefs and practices of experienced language classroom practitioners", for the same reason.

Therefore, the aim of the study is to research upper secondary teachers' attitudes towards, and use of, critical approaches in teaching literature in the subject of English in Sweden, with reference to identified issues in the Swedish school system and the regulatory documents, along with the curriculum and syllabi for English.

**Research Questions:**

- What are teachers' attitudes towards using critical perspectives in their teaching of literature in the subject of English, and critical perspectives that deal with power, more specifically?
- Do or do they not use critical perspectives? Why (not)?
- How do teachers motivate their stance in relation to the syllabi, curriculum and democracy aspects in the Swedish school system?

## **Theory and Background**

### **The Swedish Context**

Before exploring English teachers and their teaching of literature, examining the Swedish educational context in more detail is useful for situating this study. Firstly, inequality is increasing due to three main factors. Students with highly educated parents are more likely to do well academically (Skolverket, 2010, p.9). There is furthermore a problem with discrimination of students that fall outside the dominant norm. Being white, heterosexual, a secular Christian, having high socio-economic status and remaining within one's gender role entails the lowest risk of being discriminated (Skolverket, 2009, p.11). Additionally, a 2010 study shows that Swedish students' engagement in political and societal issues is generally lacking and that "many students refrain from engaging in decision making situations with the motivation that it is futile" (Skolverket, 2010, p.12, my translation). This is especially true for non-native students, as well as students with low socio-economic status, which Skolverket views as particularly alarming (2010, p.11). "Given the state of things, the Swedish education system has a proportionally more important role in involving students as future citizens in the society" (Skolverket, 2010, p.11, my translation). While these are issues for the entire education workforce, this study will explore the English teachers' role in particular and the practice of teaching of literature especially.

### **The English Teaching Context**

When examining the curriculum and the syllabi for English with the focus of this study in mind and with the previously identified issues as a backdrop, a few key points stand out. The curriculum puts particular emphasis on critical thinking ability (Skolverket 2011, pp. 7-10), as well as the syllabi for English (pp. 53-65). Moreover, the syllabi state that teachers should, for English 5,6 and 7 respectively, work with (contemporary and older) literature (and other fiction) (Skolverket, 2011, p. 54) and "[l]iving conditions, attitudes,

values, traditions, social issues as well as historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011, p.60).

While these two core content topics are not inevitably connected, numerous researchers and theorists agree that literature can provide “a window to ethnic and global cultures through in-depth inquiries into a particular culture and the integration of multiple cultural perspectives into every classroom” (Gibson & Parks, 2014, p 42; see also Appleman, 2009; Beach et al., 2011; Bobkina, 2014; Hall, 2015; Van, 2009).

Lastly, it is interesting to note that Skolverket (2013) states that schools are responsible for teaching both knowledge (in this case English) and values as an inseparable entity, but that “it is too often the case that principles and values are taught at specific instances, separated from everyday teaching” (p.5, my translation). The next subsections ties these previous sections together and examines one way of incorporating language and content learning (English literature) together with values and critical thinking through the use of critical pedagogy, and critical theory more specifically.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Building on Freire’s description of a new, critical way of teaching in *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972), several concepts have emerged. Critical work, transformative pedagogy and emancipatory literacy are but a few examples (Santana-Williamson, 2000, p.3), and they can be linked to theories such as critical language awareness, critical discourse analysis and critical literacy. What ties these concepts together is the notion that “sociopolitical issues from students' lives, such as, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, relations of power, inequality, discrimination, feminism, violence, ethnocentrism, and others are brought into light in the classroom” (p.3), and the students are provided the tools to critically engage with these topics.

The aim is to enable students to develop their critical thinking ability, in order for them to recognise and act on injustices that affect them, which will in turn achieve social change (Beach et al., 2011; Janks, 2013; Santana-Williamson, 2000, Hall, 2015). Critical pedagogy has the potential of aiding the students in both meeting the curricular goals of critical thinking and addressing the inequalities at work in their school setting (Appleman, 2015; Beyer, 2001; Janks, 2013; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012). Therefore, it can be viewed as a particularly suitable method to use considering the issues facing the Swedish school system that are mentioned in previous sections.

On a more specific note, Paran (2008, p.485) argues that engaging with literature encourages critical thinking skills. Additionally, studies on critical approaches to language teaching and reading instruction have shown a potential positive effect on critical thinking abilities (e.g. Abednia & Izadnia, 2013; Fahim & Khatib, 2013; Ko, 2013; Janks, 2013). Taking into consideration the large emphasis on critical thinking ability in the curriculum, this method could be a useful tool.

Furthermore, Kalogirou & Malafantis (2012) states that the reverse may also be true; that critical pedagogy can have a positive effect on reading skills. “By addressing issues of social power and oppression, or issues of class, race and gender, critical pedagogy promotes student practices that help them become active and engaged readers as they search for meaning and question the ideologies inherent in the texts they read” (p.268). The next subsection will further debate the notion that texts are ideological and discuss critical practice in literature teaching through the use of critical theory.

### **Literature and Ideology**

As stated in the above cited excerpt of the syllabi for English, teachers are supposed to engage with literature. Literature that is, as described in the quote above and according to numerous theorists, inherently ideological (Appleman, 2015; Beach et al. 2011;



Cambers & Gregory, 2006; Hall, 2015; Fairclough, 2001; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012; McGroarty, 2010). Ideology, then, can be seen as a lens through which you view the world that is attained (for the most part subconsciously) from the context that is one's life. It determines, amongst other things, what you value as important, how you view gender roles and how you categorise people (Beach et al. 2011, p.153). Ideology is what preserves the social power structures, and is most effective when it is invisible and unchallenged (Fairclough, 2001). In order for educators and students to address the discrimination that occurs in schools and the inequalities at work in classrooms and in the education system as a whole, ideological aspects need to be made visible. It is a responsibility and challenge for English teachers to make the students aware of the ideologies present in the literature used in the classroom, as well as in the students' reading of it, since there is no such thing as a neutral reading of a text (Appleman, 2009; Fairclough, 2001; Chambers & Gregory, 2006).

### **Critical Theory**

An excellent way to accomplish the above stated goal is through the use of critical (literary) theory, which “is to teach critical thinking about texts of all kinds” (Wilson, 2014, p.69). Critical theorist Lois Tyson, author of *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, takes it one step further and offers the following explanation of critical theory: “[W]hen we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism; when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are doing critical theory” (2006, p. 6). The use of critical theory makes visible not only the ideology embedded in the text, but also within the reader.

Tyson also underscores the connection between critical theory and critical pedagogy in that many of them involve a desire to change the world for the better (2006, p.6). Examples of this are feminist, Marxist and postcolonial criticism, which are theories that

examines power aspects in literature. These perspectives<sup>1</sup> will therefore be the main focus of this study, as “considerations of power and oppression both invite us to consider the kinds of prevailing ideologies that construct the social realities in which we participate, sometimes unwittingly” (Appleman, 2015, p.54). In Lozic’s article on critical literacy on the Skolverket website, he also identifies gender, class and ethnicity perspectives as essential to observe the power structures prevalent in society and their influence on texts and on students’ lives (2014). This is an important step towards highlighting, and subsequently diminishing the inequalities the students face. Tyson (2006), along with Appleman, (2015), Beach et al. (2011) and Chambers & Gregory (2006) furthermore advocate using multiple perspectives, since offering only one would be as problematic as viewing literature as a neutral source of language (Appleman, 2015, p.9). To what extent critical perspectives are being used is debateable, however, which will be further discussed in the following section.

Other literary theories deal with different aspects of the text, such as the reader’s interpretation of it, or its form (Beach et al. 2011; Tyson, 2006). While these are not the focus of this study and therefore will not be further discussed, they are certainly not without merit in terms of, for example, critical thinking aspects (Appleman, 2015; Beach et al, 2011; Chambers & Gregory, 2006; Tyson, 2009).

### **The (limited) Use of Critical Perspectives**

Van (2009) argues that “in many cases, the language teaching profession ignores or inadequately addresses how texts deal with important issues of ideology and power relations in society” (p.7). In addition, Skolverket’s report from 2010 shows that “around 40% of students claim that the teachers never or rarely examine political and societal issues using

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<sup>1</sup> Critical theories will generally be referred to as critical perspectives (“kritiska perspektiv”) throughout this study, since that is the term used in the questionnaire and interviews. The reason for this is that the actual Swedish translation of “critical theories” is “litteraturvetenskapliga analysmetoder”, which was deemed too formal and unfamiliar. Had the questionnaire and interviews been conducted in English, then the term “critical theories” would have been used.

different perspectives when they discuss them during lessons” (p.9, my translation). Applebee (1993), Appleman (2009) and Hall, (2015, p.114) further argue that while universities generally are well informed on new theory on literary analysis and have implemented different approaches to engaging with literature, this is rarely the case for high school teachers. Very few students in lower grades are taught contemporary literary theory (Applebee, 1993, p.116-117, 122).

The limited use of critical perspectives might in part be due to one or several of the following reasons. According to Appleman (2009, p.4), literature study and the use of critical perspectives is still seen as esoteric. She further argues that teachers are unsure when it comes to engaging with critical lenses because of their unfamiliarity with the issues that underlie the text (p.54). This stance is also shared by Young et al. (2009) as they found that this might be because of non-native speaking teachers’ lack of confidence in teaching about the sociocultural aspects of a society that is, in some ways, foreign to them (p.151, see also Paran, 2008, p.480) and further suggests that it might also be the case that teachers see learning about culture as unimportant or irrelevant to the learning of languages (p.152). Beach et al. (2011) furthermore state that “English education may not have prepared you [the teacher] to feel comfortable teaching literary theory” (p. 154). An issue which is further highlighted by Paran (2008), who argues that “the lack of training then means that if teachers want to use literature later on in their teaching, they do not have the methodological wherewithal to do so” (p.480).

Engaging with issues of power through the use of critical pedagogy is seen by many teachers as “too political” (Janks, 2010, p.40), but while one can argue that engaging with literature through critical lenses is taking a political stance, several theorists maintain that “all knowledge is ideologically determined and we are politically irresponsible if we do not recognize this” (Khaghaninejad, 2015, p. 103; see also Appleman, 2015; Chambers &

Gregory, 2006). Appleman (2014) brings up a specific challenge with teaching the class lens. As many want to advance in the social hierarchy, this system that entails the prevailing ideology is hard to critique and resist, since we participate in it (p.65).

### **The Teacher Population Composition and Teacher Education (TE)**

A lack of training in using literature, literary theory and critical pedagogy aside, there is also an overall lack of diversity in the teacher population in Sweden. “Most teachers are native Swedes, even in districts that are dominated by immigrant families. There are too few teachers with diverse backgrounds, which leads to undesirable consequences” (SOU 2005, p.76, my translation). Moreover, according to the Swedish Higher Education Authority, students from highly educated backgrounds are twice as likely to continue on to higher education (such as teacher training programs) as other students (UKÄ, 2015, p.8), which means there is little hope for a rapid change regarding this matter. Several theorists and researchers have identified issues in relation to critical pedagogy that might stem from this kind of homogeneousness (Beyer, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Dantas-Whitney et al., 2009; Han, 2013; Hatch & Groenke, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2005; McKinney, 2005; Sleeter, 1995; Vescio et al., 2009). Although their research is based in other parts of the world, they explore situations that are very relevant for the Swedish context. Ladson-Billings (2005) and Vescio et al. (2009) argue that since teachers are mostly white middle class females, students might get an unrepresentative view of society, which is why bringing in critical perspectives is essential.

The vast majority of research has taken place in a university setting, examining preservice teachers’ (PTs) attitude to working with critical perspectives. As in the Swedish context, PTs mainly consist of white, middle-class females. The results show that PTs had marginal understanding of diversity matters, and that they furthermore often resisted many of the activities connected with critical pedagogy, such as changing perspective from privileged

to marginalised and found it very difficult to critique their own beliefs and privilege. While they to some extent could intellectually engage with several social issues, they had trouble converting knowledge into action and applying it in their own lives and teacher roles (Dantas-Whitney et al., 2009; Han, 2013; Hatch & Groenke, 2009; Sleeter, 1995; Vescio et al., 2009). However, the researchers also point out that in some cases using critical pedagogy was something that motivated the PTs, and that they after engaging with it had an increased ability to take on different viewpoints (Hatch & Groenke, 2009; Vescio, et al., 2009; Sleeter, 1995). Hatch & Groenke (2009) also noted that infusing critical approaches with more traditional ones, gradually building awareness, teaching analytic skills and letting students identify and address their own issues proved to be an effective method for engaging the PTs.

McKinney's 2005 study draws on the above mentioned research, but instead turns the analytical spotlight on the researcher. Her results highlight issues such as discomfort with the topic of difference as a white middle class person and a general lack of institutional support. There was also a dilemma of pushing reluctant students to engage with social justice issues while still maintaining a democratic teacher identity. She also found that being more aware of possible tensions while creating a discursive space in the classroom resulted in less anxiety and better conflict solving. The many difficulties aside, Cochran-Smith (2004) argues that in order "to alter a dysfunctional system, we need teachers who regard teaching as a political activity and embrace social change as part of the job" (p.46), even though it might involve discomfort and resistance.

## **Methods**

In examining preservice teachers' attitudes, as most studies have done, many researchers used multimethod approaches. This study follows that trend, though the participants are practicing teachers, and a brief questionnaire is complemented with qualitative interviews. The following section further discusses the choice of methods, as well as the literary perspectives that are examined.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection was carried out in two phases: an online questionnaire and a set of follow-up semi-structured interviews. One reason for choosing questionnaires and follow up interviews as the means for data collection is that “gathering information in different form from different sources almost always improves the quality of qualitative studies” (Hatch, 2002, p.97). Nunan (1992) further adds that while questionnaires with open ended questions may yield rich data, semi-structured interviews are “quite extraordinary” in this regard (p.149). Another reason is that many researchers who conduct studies on teacher attitudes often use multimethod approaches. Faez & Valeo's (2012) study on novice teachers' perception on their preparedness and efficacy is one example, which combines the use of questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews. They use the data collected through the questionnaires to pin-point specific areas of interest where more qualitative data could then be gained through semi-structured interviews, which is the method also utilised in this study. An internet based questionnaire (created using SurveyMoney Inc.) was deemed the most suitable due to its flexibility, as teachers can fill it out when- and wherever they like. This flexibility also somewhat applies to the interviews, as they were carried out via telephone at a time chosen by the participant.

## **Questionnaire Participant Sampling**

When it comes to questionnaires, in contrast with other elicitation techniques, Nunan (1992) brings up some issues that need to be considered. One concerns the sampling of subjects, in this case teachers of English at upper secondary level. He argues that “small-scale studies may decide to use non-probability samples because they are easier to establish and, in consequence, cheaper”, which is not seen as an issue, since this “may also be perfectly satisfactory for a preliminary study whose aim is [...] not to obtain data which can be generalized from sample to population” (1992, p.142). Purposive convenience sampling through emailing eligible participants was therefore used, arguably at the expense of external validity. Other validity threats include that the study surveys fairly few participants (Dörnyei, 2003, p.72) and that teachers who know of and are interested in critical perspectives might be more inclined to answer than those who are not. Furthermore, teachers from the Lund and Helsingborg region are certainly not representative of the Swedish teacher population as a whole. However, this study does not aim to make generalisations across the population or analyse factors such as age or ethnicity (Dörnyei, 2003, p.74), and the questionnaire results are mainly used for selecting interviewees (Faez & Valeo, 2012). Emails were sent to 130 English teachers whose emails could be found on private and public school’s web pages.

## **Questions**

Another item of consideration is the nature of the questionnaire questions. Concerning the aspect of closed vs. open questions, Nunan (1992, p.143) as well as Dörnyei (2003, p.10-14) agrees that closed questions, while they are easier to administer and analyse, are less likely than open questions to yield answers with useful information that reflects the participants’ beliefs. This issue is hopefully evaded by adding an “other” alternative to questions along with a comment section, as well as using clarification questions as a follow up to close questions (Dörnyei, 2003, p.50). The open ended questions will hopefully provide

richer answers that may yield more diverse information, illustrative quotes and identify issues not previously expected (Dörnyei, 2003, p.47). In an attempt to counter possible “fatigue effects” (Dörnyei, 2003, p.14), the questionnaire will be in Swedish, which is presumably most of the teachers’ native language.

### **Selection of Theories**

Feminist, Marxist and post-colonial criticism are some of the main theories that deal with power aspects in literature, and have therefore been selected in this study to represent the most evident intersection of critical pedagogy and critical literary theory. In order to contrast these perspectives, there are a vast number of theories, but the other critical lenses used in this study are psychoanalytic (Ps), structuralist (S) and reader-response (RR) criticism. These were included mainly due to their high prevalence in the literature on teaching critical theory available at the Lund University and Malmö Högskola libraries, namely Appleman, (2015) Beach et al. (2011) and Tyson (2006). These books also come recommended by Wilson (2014, p.71) who has examined ways of engaging with critical theory in the high school classroom. Psychoanalytic criticism was furthermore chosen due to its rudimentary nature; Tyson argues that “psychoanalytic concepts have become part of our everyday lives, and therefore psychoanalytic thinking should have the advantage of familiarity” (2006, p.11) which is why it is likely used by teachers to some extent. Structuralist criticism, instead, acts as a contrast to the other theories examined in that it focuses on form and constructional aspects of texts (Tyson, 2006, pp. 209-234). Lastly, reader-response criticism was included as it was deemed likely to be among the most frequently used in literature teaching at upper secondary level. As it draws on the students’ own interpretation of a text, it may require less specific theoretical background knowledge (Tyson, 2006, pp. 170-190). While reader-response criticism certainly empowers the students in that their voices and opinions are taken into consideration in the classroom, it does not deal



explicitly with power structures, like feminist, Marxist and postcolonial criticism. There are certainly other critical theories that could have been used to contrast the chosen perspectives, but due to the study's restrictions and previously mentioned questionnaire fatigue effects, only these three were selected. However, teachers that use other perspectives are invited to add those under the "other" option to each question in the questionnaire.

### **Piloting**

Nunan argues that "it is imperative to pilot any questionnaire which is developed" (1992, p.145). The reason for this is to ensure that the questions do in fact generate analysable answers, and that issues to do with wording, ambiguity, processing of the answer and length of time to complete are sorted out (Dörnyei, 2003, p.64). The questionnaire was piloted by three colleagues who confirmed the clarity and content focus of the questions.

### **Structure**

The questionnaire questions were divided into four sections. The first section contained questions about participants' gender and qualifications (Faez & Valeo, 2012, p.454). In the second and third section, participants were asked about the use of critical perspectives in their teacher training and in their current teaching, as well as what they perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of the different critical perspectives. The final section contained an open question where participants could write feedback or any additional information, and upon completing the questionnaire participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in follow-up interviews.

### **Follow-up Interviews**

Four of the participants who agreed to be interviewed were selected on the basis of interesting responses to the questionnaire (Faez & Valeo, 2012, p.455; Hatch, 2002, p.97). The criteria for selection was as follows: (1) individuals who indicated a particularly positive attitude towards the use of critical perspectives, (2) individuals who stated the use of none or

very few, and (3) individuals who indicated a negative attitude towards the use of critical perspectives. A total of 25 teachers completed the questionnaire, of which 8 volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews. Based on their responses to the questions about their use of critical perspectives, 5 teachers were selected for interviews, and 4 were able to participate. Three participants that met the criteria for (1) and one for (2) and (3) respectively, were selected. Unfortunately the latter was not able to participate. The interviews were carried out by phone, audiotaped and supplemented by notes (Nunan, 1992, p.153) and relevant sections were transcribed and translated to English. After having agreed to the interview being recorded, and quotes used in the study, participants responded to a core questions on their attitude towards, and use of critical perspectives in the teaching, and another on how their teacher education has influences their practice in this regard, along with a few customised questions for probing the particular responses of the participants (Faez & Valeo, 2012, p.455).

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was a two-step process. Firstly the quantitative data from the questionnaire was compiled, and secondly the qualitative data from the questionnaire was processed and the interviews were transcribed. The quantitative data in this study is used as a backdrop for the qualitative findings and serves as a means to draw parallels and discover connections between answers to the different questions. Qualitative analysis included identifying themes from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the interview data investigating teachers' attitudes and use of critical perspectives. Analysis of the interview data and open-ended questions of the questionnaire was systematically organised through interpreting and dividing the answers into categories (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 9-10). It included repeated reading of the questionnaire answers and transcribed interviews for content analysis in order to develop codes that were organised into themes (Saldaña, 2013, p.14).

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Participating Teachers' Composition and Background**

The teachers that were emailed seemed statistically representative with regard to their composition. About three quarters were female, which is also the case for teachers on a national scale in the age group 20-49 years old, while there is a more even distribution in the older age group 50-64 years (where roughly 43% are male), according to SCB (Statistics Sweden, 2010a, p. 33). This uneven distribution is likely to increase, as more and more women chose to become secondary and upper secondary school teachers (ibid). An even higher proportion had Swedish sounding names. This is not surprising, as only roughly a fifth of all university students have parents with non-native backgrounds (SCB, 2010b), which is most likely also the case for teacher students. The answer to questionnaire item (QI) 1 revealed that 19 (76%) of the participants were female and 6 (24%) were male, and so the number of teachers that chose to participate also reflected this make-up (their background could not be speculated on, however, as they were anonymous). As one Swedish Government Official Report (2005) pointed out, this lack of diversity entails undesirable consequences. For example, Gibson & Parks (2014) argue that it is important that students see themselves reflected in the classrooms where they learn, which is likely to regularly occur for students from mainstream Swedish families (p. 42), while this is rarely the case for students from minority groups.

QI 2 showed that all the participants were certified upper secondary teachers, which is interesting considering the vast number of uncertified educators in the Swedish upper secondary school, where Skolverket (2015) estimates that about a quarter of teachers lacks certification. When looking at teachers' practice concerning literature and critical pedagogy, it is certainly interesting to see whether or not teachers have completed teacher training. If they

have not, it is probable that they have not encountered this method of working, since it is used mainly in university settings (Applebee, 1993; Appleman, 2009; Hall, 2015).

The answers to QI 3 reveal that 17 teachers had obtained their certification through completing a teacher program and 8 through KPU (an option for university students who have already acquired enough subject knowledge required for teaching, but who need complementary pedagogical training before becoming licensed teachers). Had the number of participants been larger, it would have been interesting to examine any difference in attitudes and use of critical perspectives between the two groups, as participants that have completed a teacher program got their pedagogic instruction interwoven with the subject knowledge.

QI 4 revealed that all but one of the 25 participants stated that fiction had been used in their teacher training or English education that was followed by KPU. Taken into consideration that working with literature is part of the core content in the syllabi for English (Skolverket, 2011), this is not surprising.

### **Perspectives Used in Teacher Education (TE) and in Teachers' Practice**

The answers to QI 5 reveal that regardless of teacher training through a TE program or KPU, a majority of the teachers were introduced to a couple or more critical perspectives during their education. Only four stated that none of the perspectives were used. The four teachers that ticked "other" all stated that their teacher training was completed too long ago for them to remember whether or which perspectives were used.

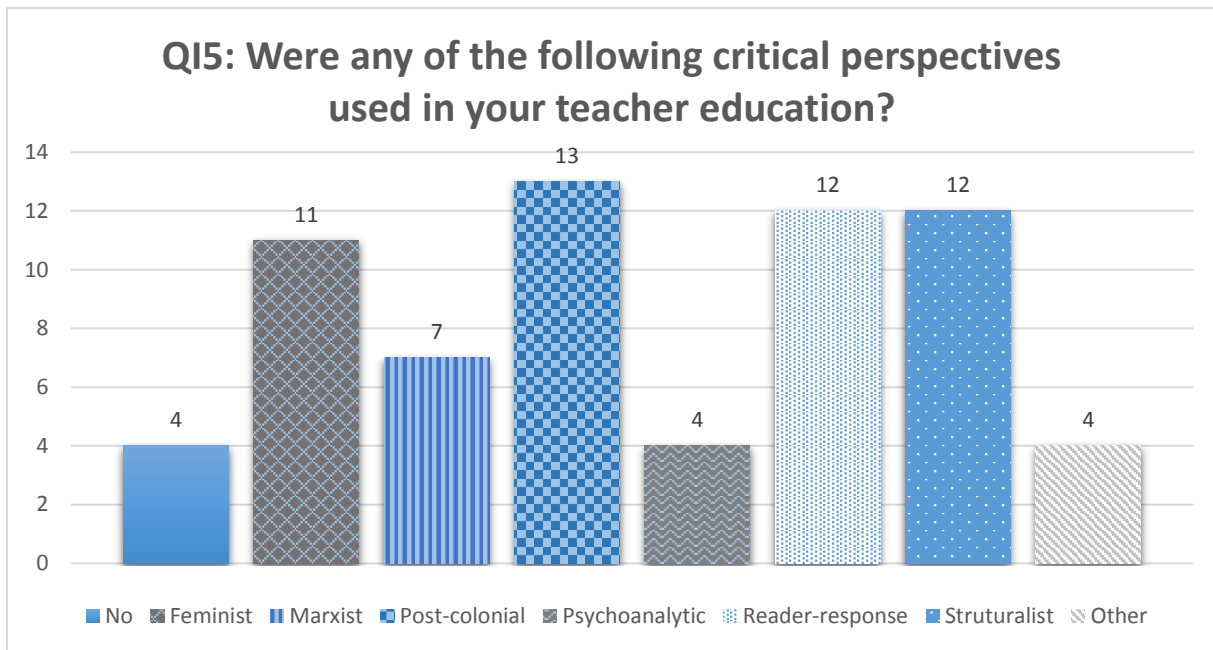


Figure 1 – Critical perspectives used in participants’ teacher education. Multiple answers possible.

Of the four interview participants, participant 2 and 3 (P2 and P3) stated that they had engaged with several perspectives during their TE, while participant 1 and 4 (P1 and P4) indicated that since it was too long ago it was hard to remember, but that critical perspectives were used to some extent, and not at all respectively. When asked what perspectives they use in their teaching, P2 and P3 both use all of the six perspectives surveyed in this study. P4 tries to use the three perspectives that deal with power quite extensively, while P1 only use reader-response (RR) systematically, but briefly address the other perspectives without explicitly naming them.

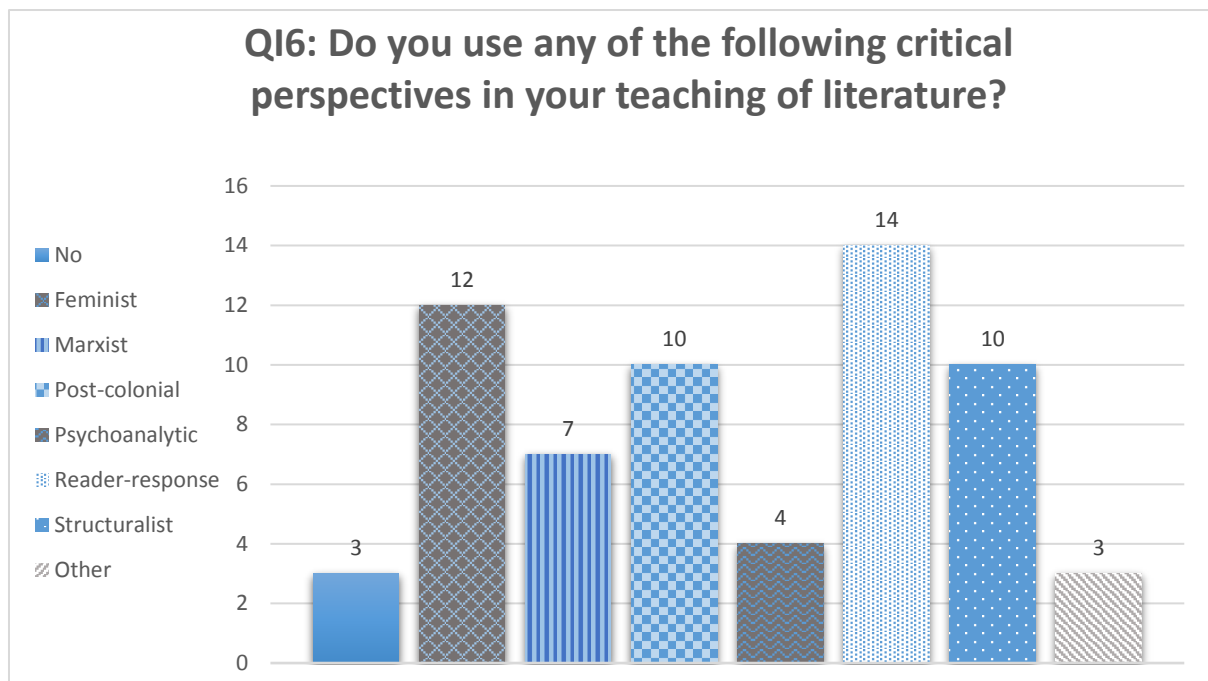


Figure 2 - Critical perspectives participants use in their own teaching. Multiple answers possible.

The answers to Q16 reveals that contrary to what many of the theorists argue, which is that critical theory is rarely implemented in upper secondary school settings (Applebee, 1993; Appleman; 2014; Hall, 2015), more than three quarters of the participants in this study use critical perspectives in their teaching of literature. While this certainly is not applicable to the entire teacher population in any way, it is interesting to note that amongst the teachers in the Lund and Helsingborg region that participated in this study, critical theory seems to be used quite extensively. Furthermore, there is an even distribution of use of perspectives with regard to those that deal with power, i.e. feminist (F), Marxist (M) and postcolonial (PC) criticism, and those that do not, i.e. psychoanalytic (Ps), reader-response (RR) and structuralist (S) criticism. Those who selected “other” did so in order to comment on their use of the perspectives, or expressing a wish to use more of them.

Worth noting is that (Ps) is used to a very limited degree by the teachers surveyed in this study, contrary to what might be expected, given its description as a quite fundamental perspective (e.g. Tyson, 2006, p.11). Surprisingly, considering its reputation as

an abstract perspective with declining popularity over the past decades (Finlayson & Valentine, 2002), (S) is used quite extensively. This is only done in a very superficial manner however, as teachers stated that they might engage with topics such as “what makes a poem a poem” or analysing genres, while they scarcely discuss theoretical aspects in any great depth. If this is still to be considered structuralist criticism is an interesting aspect, but will not be further discussed in this study.

Contrasting the participants’ use of critical perspectives in their own teaching with which were used in their TE, there are few differences worth pointing out. One is that fewer teachers use (PC) and (S) in their practice (table 2) than in their TE (table 1), while they use (RR) to a greater extent than in their TE. This might have to do with the advantages and disadvantages teachers’ experience the methods have, which are discussed further on in this section. What is interesting to note when looking at individual answers is that there seem to be a very strong correlation between the critical perspectives used in TE and the practitioners own use of these. In other words, the perspectives the teacher was familiarised with during their TE are the perspectives they are likely to use. This highlights the importance of TE when it comes to the implementation of critical theory in upper secondary school, which will be further discussed in the section “Teacher education” below.

### **Advantages of Using a Certain Critical Perspectives or Critical Perspectives in General**

QI 7 asked the participants to comment on what they found most useful with the different perspectives. The themes that emerged in the open questionnaire item answers and interview data were that critical perspectives are advantageous since they (a) encourage critical thinking skills and therefore connect to the curriculum and syllabi, (b) address values and therefore connect to regulatory documents, (c) address content (in the form of social and cultural issues for example) and language (extended vocabulary for example) and therefore

connect to the syllabi, (d) enhance student motivation and reading experience, and (e) open up the possibility of integrating other subjects.

The most frequent theme in the answers was (a), were five participants stated that this was the main advantage of using (F), (M), (PC) and (RR). For (Ps) and (S) on the other hand, only one participant stated (a) as the main advantage. Teachers seem to agree that engaging with critical theory is, as shown in previous sections, generally beneficial when it comes to critical thinking aspects (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Fahim & Khatib, 2013; Ko, 2013; Janks, 2013). However, in this case it seems to be especially accurate for the perspectives that deal with power (which are closely connected with the notion of critical pedagogy) as suggested by numerous sources (Appleman, 2015; Beyer, 2001; Janks, 2013; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012; Santana-Williamson, 2000).

Themes (b) and (c) follow the same pattern, were two participants stated those as the main advantage for using (F), (M), (PC), while none stated it as the reason for using (RR), (Ps) and (S). On the topic of perspectives that deal with power, P2 expresses the following:

There is so much content that needs to be addressed, in addition to literature specific elements, and therefore it can be quite useful to think of the big picture, that you need to bring up the different perspectives. Then there are plenty of features in the regulatory documents, like the equal treatment plan and equality aspects for example, that can be addressed in a natural way in the classroom discussions when discussing literature. So it is intertwined... and that is really our responsibility, to do these things and to reflect thoroughly on them and incorporating them in our teaching (my translation).

This further highlights that critical pedagogy, and more specifically critical literary perspectives that deal with power, certainly can act as a means to both integrating values into everyday teaching (which is imperative according to Skolverket, 2013, p.5) and



addressing core content aspects of the syllabi for English (Skolverket, 2011, p.60), as mentioned in the theory section. P4 identifies the advantage of “students extending their vocabulary when engaging with these topics”, and further adds that “these perspectives are highly relevant at her school, since the students have very diverse backgrounds”. This ties in with the fact that these students are identified by Skolverket (2010, pp. 11-12) as running the risk of being discriminated, demotivated and un-empowered in the current school system, and with Gibson & Parks’ (2014) notion that it is important that students see themselves reflected in the books they read and the curriculum they study (p. 42), which is something that should not only be true for mainstream Swedish students.

Interestingly, (d) is only used by participants for (RR), (Ps) and (S), where (RR) is clearly over-represented with 4 participants stating (d) as the main reason for using that perspective. The relatively few teachers that use (Ps) and (S) state that their main reason for doing so is to enhance the students’ reading experience, and that “the students enjoy discussing psychological processes”. (RR) is considered by several, as described by one participant, “the easiest, most common perspective, as it is rooted in the subjective viewpoint of the individual students, which is something they are comfortable discussing”. As another participant pointed out, however, that it often involves “less social criticism or broadening of perspectives”.

Moreover, P3 mentioned using critical perspectives “because they are excellent tools when you are aiming at meeting criteria such as ‘nuanced’, which are prevalent at these levels - that is, when you need elaborated answers where the students should reason and argue” (P3; see also Skolverket, 2011, pp. 53-65). P4 stated that “students would probably much rather work with that [(F), (M) and (PC)] than having a lesson on grammar for example” but adds that “they as a class are very eager to debate and discuss controversial topics, though”.

Regarding (e), the participants brought up history and social sciences as subjects suitable for integration, where history was the most frequently mentioned. This was exclusively done in connection to the perspectives that deal with power, i.e. (F) and (M), and especially in relation to (PC). Engaging with specific historical background knowledge (some teachers used the term scaffolding in this context) was also described as sometimes being a prerequisite for working with said perspective, in order for students to understand the context of a literary work. For (F) and (M), more links were made to the current public debate on gender and social equality, and thus the social science subjects. There also seem to be a correlation between teachers having social science or history as their second subject, or working closely with those colleagues, and having a more positive attitude towards using critical perspectives.

### **Challenges with Using a Certain Critical Perspectives or Critical Perspectives in General**

For QI 8 the participants were asked to comment on possible disadvantages of using the different perspectives and four major themes were outlined: (w) it is too difficult and/or abstract for students at upper secondary level, (x) it is time-consuming, (y) issues with stereotyping and prejudices arise, or discussions get too political, and (z) the use of critical perspectives is not explicitly stated in the curriculum.

Regarding the use of perspectives generally, the most frequently stated disadvantage is certainly (w), where (S) in particular is described as especially hard and technical for students, as it requires very specific terminology. (S) is furthermore defined as the perspective the students enjoy the least to work with, not least because of its abstractness. Much of the literature on literary theory argues that this does not have to be the case, however (Appleman, 2014; Beach et al., 2011; Chambers & Gregory, 2006; Tyson, 2009), and claims that all perspectives have the potential to be made accessible to students at upper secondary

level. Other perspectives that teachers considered difficult are (M) and (PC), mainly due to the background knowledge they deemed necessary for this type of analysis. P4 states that “for many students, working with these perspectives becomes sort of a ‘plusmeny’ (add-on) - you might not get there with all groups, which is a shame, but there are other things higher up on the priority list”. Together with a few other participants, P4 prioritises linguistic features such as grammar, spelling and sentence structure.

The second most prevalent answer was (y). Teachers stated that when engaging in (F) and (PC) analysis, the text examples that displayed sexism and racism were sometimes, as one participant described it, “so obvious that they were clichéd, and the discussions never went beyond superficiality”. It became the stereotypes portrayed in the books that were discussed, and not the generally more nuanced identities of people in today’s society, or their interconnection and power hierarchies, which was the teachers’ original aim. This is in accordance with what Young et al. (2009) found, namely that classroom discussions “tended to be closer to this ‘superficial’ conceptualisation than to a ‘deeper’, more critical exploration of sociocultural norms, culturally derived attitudes, beliefs, ways of thinking and ways of communicating” (p.151). P3 further elaborate on the issue of stereotyping, superficiality and prejudice in stating that:

They [students] might have strong opinions that they bring with them from home, or that are based on what they have read briefly somewhere. When discussing these topics, the feminist perspective for example, well, there they might have certain preconceptions concerning what will be debated. Then you have to consider having a discussion beforehand on “what is feminism” - because there are just so many aspects - and clarify how *we* are going to view it. I do perceive some perspectives as being more provocative than others, and either you discuss it in advance, or you as the teacher have to be prepared to – if the students have strong and differing opinions – to challenge them, and make them take responsibility for their views and also challenge them to be able to explain and clarify them. (P3)

With reference to this, Gibson & Parks found that “students often share the ‘racist’ views of their parents, most of them admittedly so” (2014, p. 41). Even though the situation does not seem to be as extreme in this case, it is important to remember that issues such as discrimination are prevalent in the Swedish school system, and that methods for increasing understanding are sorely needed, along with the resources for implementing them (Skolverket, 2009, pp.12-13).

A couple of teachers stated that “in order not to *be*, or to be perceived as, too political” when dealing with (F) and (PC) criticism, “it is important to not generally accuse ‘men’ or ‘white people’”, but simply keep the discussion on an individual, but not personal, level. The question is whether this is going far enough in the analysis of these issues, however, and if not taking a step toward a more radical approach is necessary in order to achieve a systemic understanding of the problems, and in turn reach a level where discussions on for example universal and relevant solutions is possible. As an example of this, one teacher described analysing a fictional character’s situation and experience of oppression as an excellent way of de-personalising discussions on values and other more sensitive topics, and therefore not only making it more accessible to students, but also using it as a stepping board towards a more in-depth as well as overarching analysis of inequality issues.

One participant also stated that “some students feel that issues to do with race do not concern them, which leads to decreased motivation” when engaging with (PC). One reason for students perceiving these topics as irrelevant might be due in part to the schools, particularly in the Lund area, being fairly homogenous in many respects. On the other hand, it is arguable that this only makes the need for using critical perspectives even greater, as students might not ever get to know people from other (and perhaps less privileged) backgrounds along with their viewpoints and experiences. Researchers that have examined preservice teachers’ attitudes to working with critical pedagogy (Beyer, 2001; Cochran-Smith,

2004; Han, 2013; Hatch & Groenke, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Vescio et al., 2009), have certainly identified a great need for practice in changing perspectives from privileged to marginalised, especially in such homogenous settings as teacher training programs, but their findings might to some extent be applicable here too.

Concerning (z) and (x), the teachers who state that they don't use critical perspectives (other than possibly (RR), to some extent) indicated the reasons being, as one participant states, that "it is time-consuming and not an explicit criteria in the syllabi". Fostering critical citizens with democratic values is, however, an overarching aim in the regulatory documents (Skolverket, 2011, p. 6). Teachers should strive to teach of such values along with subject content in their everyday practice, and not as a separate entity, as is often the case, according to Skolverket (2013, p. 5), and using critical perspectives could be one way of accomplishing that.

Additionally, another participant stated that "at upper secondary level, literature is mainly used to increase the students' language skills", and "while engaging in literary analysis is a possibility, it's not something I have done [in my teaching]". There is not necessarily a disparity between language learning and using critical perspectives, however, and one might even enhance positive aspects of the other, as for example Kalogirou & Malafantis' (2012) findings have shown.

### **Teacher Education (TE)**

As previously mentioned, there seem to be a strong correlation between the use (or absence) of critical perspectives in teachers' own practice and in their prior TE. For the few participants that stated having limited experience regarding this, it might be the case that, as Paran (2008, p. 480) suggests: the lack of training then means that if teachers want to use literature later on in their teaching, they do not have the methodological wherewithal to do so, and fall back on teaching the way they were taught. This ties in with Beach et al.'s (2011)

notion that English teacher education “may not have prepared you to feel comfortable teaching literary theory” (p. 154). Furthermore, these teachers tend to see working with critical perspectives as time consuming, and incompatible with syllabi criteria. Neither do they recognise a link between using such methods and meeting the overarching aims such as teaching democratic values for example. Moreover, they indicate having a more instrumental view on language learning in general, expressing that their top priorities are more specific linguistic features rather than for example critical thinking skills.

The correlation between TE and practice is also highlighted by some questionnaire participants emphasise that the thorough use of critical perspectives in their TE is what has lead them to implement these in their own teaching. Especially P2 and P3 bring up their teacher education as a main factor in contributing to this. They both express that they received a comprehensive and in-depth coaching on how to engage with literature using multiple critical lenses, and that they overall are very satisfied with that portion of their education as they “feel thoroughly prepared for instructing their students on these topics”, as P2 states. This is an example of a teacher education that does indeed deal “with social justice issues of race, class, and gender - and not just in superficial vicarious ways” (Gibson & Parks, 2014, p 42).

A majority of the teachers examined in this study do in fact use critical perspectives in their teaching, contrary to what one would expect after reviewing Applebee (1993), Appleman (2014) and Hall (2015). Whether the participants in this study use them to a greater degree than those in other parts of the country is fruitless to discuss here, but it is interesting to note that research conducted in other parts of Europe and in the US points towards that, in many cases, the language teaching profession ignores or inadequately addresses how subject content relates to important issues of ideology and power relations in society (Van, 2009, p.7), which fortunately does not seem to be the case here. Neither does it

seem to be the case that while changes have been made throughout the EU in the curricular frameworks to include more critical thinking objectives (Young et al., 2009), this has had little effect on English language teacher education (Paran, 2008, p.480), as most teachers, both from TE and KPU backgrounds, have worked with one or several critical perspectives.

These result highlights the important role that teacher educators have in familiarising preservice teachers with critical pedagogy and perspectives that deal with power aspects in order to prepare them for working with students from different backgrounds. As Vescio, et al.'s (2009) study on future teacher educators shows, having a single course on critical pedagogy did not leave educators feeling adequately equipped to teach it to preservice teachers. These findings can in turn be applied to teachers not feeling prepared enough to teach critical perspectives to their students after briefly engaging with it in their teacher education, or not at all.

## Conclusion

This project has shown that teachers participating in this study use critical perspectives to a much greater extent than was expected, taking into consideration the number of studies that point towards the opposite being true in many cases (Applebee, 1993; Appleman, 2009; Hall, 2015).

The teachers that use critical perspectives, especially the ones that deal with power aspects, namely feminist, Marxist and post-colonial criticism, identify several advantages. Among other things, they find it to be an effective and suitable way of addressing both content and values at the same time. By using critical pedagogy and critical perspectives, teachers express that they can cover many of the requirements in the regulatory documents, such as addressing injustice issues and promote critical thinking skills, while enhancing students' vocabulary and making them engage in discussions on important topics (see also (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Fahim & Khatib, 2013; Ko, 2013; Janks, 2013; Lozic, 2014). They furthermore expressed that it opens up for opportunities to integrate the teaching of English with other subjects. These are all examples of how teachers can benefit from incorporating the use of critical perspectives in their teaching of literature.

The teachers that do not use critical perspective, or that use them to a very limited extent identify some challenges, and for example state that working with critical perspectives is too advanced for students at upper secondary level and that discussions rarely stretch beyond superficialities. Moreover, they perceive it as too time consuming, and argue that it is not an explicit criterion in the syllabi. They instead choose to focus on linguistic aspects in their teaching of English and in working with literature.

The results also show that there seem to be a correlation between the use of critical perspectives in teachers' practice and their prior education, whether this consists of a teacher program or KPU. This highlights the importance of teacher education in instructing



preservice teachers in critical pedagogy and the use of critical perspectives ( Dantas-Whitney et al., 2009; Han, 2013; Hatch & Groenke, 2009; Sleeter, 1995; Vescio et al., 2009), if the use of those methods are to be seen as appropriate for addressing the inequalities in the Swedish school system described by Skolverket and brought up in several SOUs (Official Reports of the Swedish Government), which numerous theorists and researchers claim that they are (Appleman, 2015; Beyer, 2001; Janks, 2013; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012).

### **Limitations and Further Research**

In hindsight, there are several improvements that could have been made. First of all, more teachers could have answered the questionnaire, and been interviewed. Furthermore, at least one teacher that was negatively inclined towards using critical perspectives should have been interviewed, but due to a sudden cancellation and a limited time frame, this was not possible. In addition, it could perhaps have been foreseen that the teachers who were positively inclined towards the use of critical perspectives also were the most likely to participate, and that concealing the topic for the interviewees could have yielded more representative and interesting results. It would also have been interesting to ask participants that stated using critical perspectives to a very limited extent to reflect on their responsibility to foster democratic citizens. In general, it would have probably been possible to ask more pointed questions, such as how the participants, as fairly privileged people, feel teaching about oppression, for example. Since this study was based on questionnaires and interviews, the results only reflect teachers' attitudes, which is why a direction for further research could be to examine the actual use of critical perspectives in the English classroom.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

(Front page)

# Engelsklärares attityder till och användande av kritiska perspektiv i litteraturundervisning.

**Välkommen!**

Tack för att du deltar i min enkätstudie!

Mina uppgifter:

Emelie Ekström

[gos10eek@student.lu.se](mailto:gos10eek@student.lu.se)

0768081987

## Del 1

### Lite om dig

1. Kön:

2. Är du behörig att undervisa i engelska på högstadie- eller gymnasienivå?

3. Hur erhöill du din behörighet att undervisa i engelska?

- Lärarprogram på högskola/universitet
- Kompletterande pedagogisk utbildning (KPU)
- Annat (var god ange)



## Del 2

### Litteratur och kritiska perspektiv i lärarutbildningen

4. Användes skönlitteratur i din engelska/lärarutbildning?

5. Användes några av följande kritiska perspektiv i litteraturundervisningen?

*De engelska begreppen har använts på grund av att olika översättningar är möjliga.*

- Nej
- Feminist criticism
- Marxist criticism
- Postcolonial criticism
- Psychoanalytic criticism
- Reader-response criticism
- Structuralist criticism
- Annat (var god ange)



## Del 3

### Din användning av, och uppfattning om kritiska perspektiv

6. Använder du dig av något/några av följande kritiska perspektiv i din litteraturundervisning?

- Nej
- Feminist criticism
- Marxist criticism
- Postcolonial criticism
- Psychoanalytic criticism
- Reader-response criticism
- Structuralist criticism
- Annat (var god ange)



7. Vilka FÖRDELAR ser du med de olika perspektiven i litteraturundervisningen?

*Skriv gärna något om de perspektiv du kryssat i ovan.*

Feminist criticism

Marxist criticism

Postcolonial criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism

Reader-response criticism

Structuralist criticism

Annat (var god ange)

8. Vilka NACKDELAR ser du med de olika perspektiven i litteraturundervisningen?

*Skriv gärna något om de perspektiv du kryssat i ovan.*

Feminist criticism

Marxist criticism

Postcolonial criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism

Reader-response criticism

Structuralist criticism

Annat (var god ange)

## Del 4

**Tack än en gång för ditt deltagande!**

### Övriga frågor

9. Har du några synpunkter på denna studie eller något annat att tillägga?

10. Denna studie bygger också delvis på korta telefonintervjuer med lärare. Om du är intresserad av att delta, fyll gärna i nedanstående uppgifter. Ditt namn kommer självklart inte användas i studien.

Namn

E-postadress

Telefonnummer

This questionnaire was conducted using SurveyMonkey.