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ECEC Students’ Writing Trajectories: Academic Discourse and “Professional Habitus”

Per-Olof Erixon and Inger Erixon Arreman

ABSTRACT
In Sweden and many other countries, the academisation of teacher education goes along with increased emphasis on a student thesis, in Sweden formally entitled the final degree project. This study deals with students’ writing trajectories in Early Childhood Education and Care aimed at work in the preschool or the recreation centre. The study indicates that student writing, shaped by a variety of academic literacies, is primarily based on values of the vocational field, parallel to an emerging critical academic approach. The study suggests that academic writing is largely perceived among the students as a means to underpin the vocational field with theory, and see critical thinking and reflective practice as relevant to their future career.

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KEYWORDS
Academic literacies; early childhood education and care; final degree project; Sweden; teacher education; writing trajectory

Introduction
In Sweden and many other European countries, the “academisation” of traditionally non-university-based programmes goes along with increased emphasis on some kind of student thesis (Borg, 2007; Erixon Arreman & Erixon, 2015, 2017; Erixon Arreman & Weiner, 2007; Gustafsson, 2008; Mattsson, 2008; Neuman, 2005). In this study, we explore students’ perceptions of academic writing, including their experiences of “doing” academic writing on the way towards successfully completing a final degree project (FDP) in the undergraduate programme of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) that is provided within the Swedish higher education system. For an undergraduate professional degree, a student should present a written “final degree project” (“Examensarbete”) with an orientation to a vocational field; its scope in time (ten weeks’ full-time studies) corresponds to a Bachelor thesis in the non-vocational disciplines, for example sociology and history. Existing literature tends to portray the relationship between professional and academic knowledge as a tension and a crash between two incompatible cultures; in this study we aim at nuancing such stereotype pictures.

The specific aims of this article include tracing the perceived writing and learning journey, or the alleged “trajectory”, of ECEC students from a novice stage to a completed FDP and an undergraduate professional qualification diploma. The aims include identifying changes over time in students’ ideas on writing, such as negotiations between a vocational discourse and an academic discourse. Particularly, we focus on how the students relate to academic writing and critical thinking, including conceivable tensions and gaps between university-based knowledge and workplace-based knowledge,

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how they handle different writing norms, and how they look upon the relevance of the degree project for their future career.

The following research questions are posed:

- In what way do students’ perceptions of themselves as writers change in relation to the vocational and academic demands of the programme, according to their own understanding?
- What are students’ understandings of what it means to “do” academic writing?

The article is based on a longitudinal study conducted over about four years. Taking an ethnographic approach, interviews were collected in situ with 14 undergraduate students at one of Sweden’s major providers of ECEC. We also position the study in a sociocultural context, including the settings for ECEC within Swedish higher education. The study was conducted within a larger research project on student teachers’ writing involving different teacher education environments in Sweden and Norway.

The “Academisation” of ECEC: The Swedish Context

In Sweden, ECEC is a nationally regulated university-based education within the overarching umbrella of teacher education. Studies in ECEC are explicitly directed to work within the public service sector of early childhood (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Traditionally, ECEC has been provided with two orientations aimed respectively at preschool children (1- to 6-year-olds) and the recreation centre (before- and after-school activities), intended for children in primary school (7- to 12-year-olds). In 2011, new teacher education structures were introduced (Swedish Parliament, 2010) to synchronise with changes to the school system. At the time of this study, ECEC also included a new orientation to the preschool class (for 6-year-olds) integrated in the then new primary teacher education programme for the early years of schooling (see Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, & Vuorinen, 2011).

Timewise, the scope of full-time studies varies by the specific ECEC orientation pursued 36 months of studies (equalising 180 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)) for the recreation centre, 42 months (210 ECTS) for the preschool, and 48 months (240 ECTS) for preschool class and early primary school. Over the programme, campus-based university studies are interspersed with field experiences (internship), including a total of 20 weeks fulltime studies (30 ECTS). The teachers in schools who supervise student teachers in their practicum are sometimes addressed as field-based teacher educators. The formal examination of students’ practicum, including teaching and classroom management, is conducted by campus-based teacher educators (Hegender, 2010). Despite policy intention in many countries, including Sweden, student teachers tend to be positioned in a blurred zone between the university and the profession (Hegender, 2010).

The field of ECEC (along with nursing) constitutes one of the largest vocational programmes within the higher education system in Sweden. It mainly recruits first-generation students, predominantly female; both research (Bertilsson, Börjesson, & Broady, 2008) and statistics indicate that early childhood is likely to remain a “feminised” profession (Statistics Sweden, 2010, 2014). Within the higher education system, by applying the principles of management by objectives including decentralisation (Kim, 2001), the national objectives for any higher education programme are decided on by parliament and formulated in the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100). At the respective

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1 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System is a credit system in the higher education area. First used in Europe, it is increasingly used elsewhere as a central tool in the Bologna Process, which aims to make national systems more compatible. European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System represent the workload and defined learning outcomes of a given course or programme; 60 credits is the equivalent of a full year of study or work-based learning (European Commission, 2018).

2 For the clarity of this article we refer to ECEC as one programme. Prior to a national teacher education of 2011, ECEC included two closely overlapping orientations for the recreation centre and the preschool, including the preschool class. By the 2011 reform, orientation to the preschool class was transferred to the programme for early primary school.
institution the national objectives are then transformed and detailed as local objectives. The provision of ECEC might therefore differ among institutions. Like many other vocational university-based programmes, the practical relevance of the ECEC field is indisputable— in Sweden, legal entitlement to childcare mainly applies to a child from the early age of 12 months to 12 years (Blomqvist, 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Urban, 2009).

In the last few decades, subsequent reforms of the university, including teacher education, have chiefly aimed at the “academisation” of the vocational fields; for students, the generally stricter demands are specifically visible in the “final degree project” (Erixon Arreman & Erixon, 2015, 2017; Gustafsson, 2008; Råde, 2014). Parallel to this, national reforms of early childhood services included new emphases on knowledge, learning, and education along with “care”, manifested in the mid-1990s by the transfer of responsibilities from the social sector to the national education system (Andersson, 2013; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Nyberg, 2008). The ECEC programme today is thus governed and regulated in an interplay of both national “steering” systems for higher education, local university objectives and prerequisites including reforms of the preschool, the preschool class and the recreation centre (see Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2017; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018).

As an applied field of academic and professional knowledge, ECEC draws on a range of disciplines; a successfully completed undergraduate programme (including internship) provides a Professional degree. Early Childhood Education and Care is accordingly not an academic “tribe” in the way Becher (1994) envisions, but an interdisciplinary field or “reservoir” (Wolff, 2013). Drawing on Bernstein (2000), it has a horizontal knowledge structure composed by segments of knowledge from different topic areas and various fields (Erixon, Arreman, & Erixon, 2015, 2017); the combination of knowledge in the ECEC programme is related to its specific context, including early childhood as part and parcel of the Swedish education system, and a service that is directed to all parents within the public service system.

**Learning and Writing in the University**

The idea of vocational higher education is to transform practice into theory through mainly written texts with the overarching purpose of developing independent, critical, and problem-based thinking (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Becher, 1994; Ivanič, 1998, 2004; see also Lea & Street, 1998; Sullivan, 1996). The process of learning to write involves ways of thinking, and drawing on literacy practices and academic discourses that students may be unfamiliar with, or do not recognise as relevant to their career (Meyer & Land, 2005). Various studies on writing in vocational programmes indicate that students in fields of care and connected to social solidarity and ethics develop a vocational identity, but are unlikely to identify with academic writing and critical thinking (Macken-Horarik, Devereux, Trimingham-Jack, and Wilson, 2006) see first-generation students’ engagement in everyday, academic, and professional discourse as crucial for moving between (“dialogue with”) different discourses. Colley, James, Tedder, and Diment (2003) use “vocational habitus” as a theoretical concept to decipher the impact of learning cultures in English vocational education on student attitudes and ways of thinking. Their case studies in childcare, healthcare, and engineering indicated that effective learning included the reproduction of feelings and morals in line with the workplace.

In the first decade of the 2000s, Lenz Taguchi (2007) pointed to that many taken-for-granted notions of a dichotomy between “practice” and “theory” were being questioned among ECEC students in Sweden. Concerning teacher education in the USA, Zeichner (2010, p. 89), argued in the same line that new epistemologies, that is, new connections between campus courses and field experiences, “... will create expanded learning opportunities for prospective teachers ....” However, a recent Swedish study shows that ECEC students identified a gap between theoretical university-based knowledge and everyday work. While they saw theory as abstract and distanced, workplace-based knowledge was “concrete and real” (Karlsson Lohmander, 2015). Likewise, in a study
on schoolteachers’ writing in continuing professional development in the UK, Stierer (2000a, 2000b) identified a clash between the culture of school teaching and the culture of the academy. According to Stierer, many genres of writing adopted from traditional academic disciplines, for example sociology and psychology, are ill-suited to promote professional knowledge. Studies on undergraduate theses in sociology in the UK showed that students needed much help from tutors to recognise and frame aspects of topics and so they could be analysed in sociological terms (Ashwin, Abbas, & McLean, 2017), that is, within the particular disciplinary field. Likewise, in studies on the transformation of nursing and midwifery education (Baynham, 2000; Gimenez, 2008) from practice-oriented, including ethical, humanistic dimensions, to a disciplinary, science-based curriculum, tensions were identified concerning views on knowledge, and how they should be valued.

As it appears, across Swedish teacher education the introduction, methods, results and discussion (IMRaD) structure has become the tacit norm for writing (Gustafsson, 2008). Drawing on the APA style (American Psychological Association, 2010), it signals a rhetorical structure and makes claims of objectivity (Sollaci & Pereira, 2004). Similarly, different studies on writing in social work in the UK indicate that students tended to see the underpinnings of academic writing (positioning oneself, argumentation, providing evidence, and critical reflection) as highly useful for their career and professional writing (Hughes, Wainwright, & Ward, 2011; Rai & Lillis, 2013). In contrast, studies of student writing in ECEC and primary teacher education in Flanders (Meeus, van Looy, & Libotton, 2004) show that the academic-oriented thesis collided with the vocational aims, and further tended to promote disinterest and cheating among students.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the theoretical field of “academic literacies.” The research field of “academic literacies” has developed in response to the expansion of higher education, along with the social and cultural diversity among students (Lea & Stierer, 2000; Lillis & Scott, 2007); it highlights relations between “new” students, diverse literacies, established forms of assessment, and public discourse claims regarding the “falling standards” of undergraduate academic writing (French, 2013, p. 236). Further developed within the research field of New Literacy Studies, academic writing is emphasised as a social practice, situated in particular social contexts, involving a shift away from students’ texts towards practices and identification in academic writing (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Burke, 2008; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007). With new literacy studies as an epistemological and ideological lens, academic institutions are regarded as sites of power and discourses; discourses are seen as particular wordings and practices, including choices and decisions on what should and what should not be taken into account. It is also recognised that academic writing practices are not sealed off from professional practices and programmes.

Northedge (2003) further clarifies the difference between academic discourse and professional discourse, that is, work-based discourse; the academic discourse per se aspires to theory building, thus arguments should be questioned and detached from individuals’ social positions. In contrast, a care discourse (also see Drudy, 2008) requires employees to respond to pressures for immediate action, which includes that they absorb and obey institutional goals, whereby any debates should be with the responsible authorities.

Research on student learning indicates the presence of both explicit and implicit socialising forces that may support or constrain students’ learning and academic development. Lahn (2011) finds that individual “learning trajectories” in the teaching and health-caring professions are based on tacit skills, that is, experiences and career development acquired over time outside formal education. In line with Lahn (2011), Colley et al. (2003) use the “vocational habitus” concept to highlight students’ development of identities within different vocational cultures (Childcare, Health Studies, and Electronic and Telecommunications Engineering); students’ “learning as becoming” also includes gender stereotypes, sensibility for feelings and morals, and a capacity for emotional labour. Drawing
on Bourdieu (1990), we understand “habitus” within a given context as norms, or a social order, that tend to control and guide individuals’ thinking and behaviour; habitus, in turn, generates power relations that are culturally and symbolically renewed in an interplay between the individual’s capacity to act independently (“agency”) and the structures of the specific context. In line with a recent study on PhD students’ socialisation into an academic culture (Anderson, 2017), we also understand students’ “self-monitoring” and positioning themselves as key strategies in relation to idealized notions of a successful student. Following Foucault (1991), human thoughts and relations including academic disciplines are overall, metaphorically, regulated and controlled by a monitoring mechanism – the Panopticon – that is, self-surveillance, based on fear of breaking rules and kept in line with expectations.

**The Study**

The university where this study was conducted is one of Sweden’s largest universities that has a wide range of “pure” academic disciplines and vocational programmes. The field of teacher education includes over a dozen programmes with various orientations to age groups, levels of schooling, and subject fields; by 2017, it had about 1,300 registered student teachers. Teacher education is administratively headed by the School of Education. Specific policies for procurement at the studied university mean there is no overall discipline like Education (Pedagogik) for the pedagogical courses, but that a discipline such as History can run more general courses.

Our methodological approach of ethnography goes along with the theoretical field of academic literacies where text production in a specific situated practice is seen as “transformative” rather than “normative” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 12). Within the time limit of the research project (2012–2016), it was not possible to follow one group of students throughout a full programme; using a longitudinal approach, we addressed four different admission groups (“cohorts” [C]), that is, ECEC students in different phases of their studies. To encourage participation, we presented the project in lecture halls and on digital platforms. Altogether, we approached over 160 students, from whom 14 students (1 male, 13 female) volunteered; the gendered division among the participants thus reflects national patterns of almost exclusively women (96%) in the early childhood field, including the ECEC programme (Statistics Sweden, 2010; Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2015).

The empirical data were collected in sustained engagement with students over about four years (October 2012 to June 2016). Altogether, 17 semi-structured digitally recorded interviews, varying in time between 40 and 60 minutes, were conducted on university premises, generally at lunchtime, and participants were offered a snack. All phases of the research process comply with the Swedish Research Council’s (2017) ethical guidelines for social research (oral and written information, voluntary participation, right of withdrawal at any time, and anonymity). Both authors contributed equally to the study design, data collection, and analyses.

In late-2012, we approached a student group (C1) in their last two months of the programme just before their work on the FDP was to start. Four student volunteers (3 females, 1 male) participated in a focus-group interview on personal and academic writing experiences, including individual background data (age, previous studies, work experience). In early-2013, we approached a new admission group (C2), all females; after three reminders one student, Louise (a fictitious name) volunteered and then participated in eight interviews (L:1–L:8) over more than two years. In September 2013, we turned to a third admission group, again all females, among whom seven students volunteered (C3); over two years and eight months, the C3 students participated in seven focus-group interviews (C3:1, C3:2, C3:3, etc.), with the last interview being conducted a few days after their FDP had been presented. In October 2015, we addressed a fourth student group, also exclusively female students, who were writing up the degree project, where two students volunteered (C4).

Almost all participants were in their early- and mid-twenties, except for a few in their mid-thirties. The programmes for C1, C2, and C4 were oriented to the “traditional” ECEC programmes
for preschool and the recreation centre, whereas C3 prepared for both the preschool class and early primary school, and therefore had greater emphasis on teacher competence (see Sheridan et al., 2011). The distribution of the interviews in time, including individual interviews and focus groups, is presented in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, eight individual interviews with Louise, student of C2, were conducted between October 2013 and December 2015 (between the third and seventh, i.e., the last semester of studies of C2, and nine focus-group interviews were conducted with 13 students of three other cohorts (C1, C3, C4) between November 2012 and June 2016. The participants of C1 (four students) and C4 (two students) participated in one focus group, respectively, and in the last semester of studies, C1 in 2012 and C4 in 2016. Regarding C3, the Table shows that seven focus groups varying between two and seven participants were conducted between the third and eighth semester, that is, the last semester of studies.

The university where this study was conducted is our own workplace, although we had not met any of the student participants before the study. As mentioned, all volunteered; volunteer participation, or self-selective choice, is a precondition of fruitful interview communication (Seidman, 2006). The group talks, so-called focus groups, were led by the researchers and used to encourage the participants to discuss a common topic with others (Powney & Watts, 1987). In the individual situation, the researcher has greater control, whereas, with focus groups, this control decreases, as the informants are encouraged to explain themselves with “relatively little input from the interviewer” (Morgan, 1996, p. 11). One risk with focus groups is that there might be norms governing what is permitted to say or not to say; participants might develop a kind of collective thinking and hesitate to express ideas if they perceive them as differing from the majority or from leading members of the group, but also highlight “values and group norms” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 300). In our study group thinking is also the object of our interest.

Drawing on Wolcott (1994) and Clarke and Braun (2013), the analysis of data was conducted in several overlapping steps related to the overall aim and research questions: familiarisation with interview data, coding, searching for and defining themes, and writing up, that is, weaving together data and placing it in its sociocultural settings.

In the analysis, the interview data underwent three major transformations. In the first transformation, all interviews, altogether corresponding to 10 hours of digitally recorded speech, were transcribed verbatim and literally transformed into text, and all significant paralinguistic and extra-linguistic signs of importance for the face-to-face meeting were excluded. In the second transformation, the large bodies of text were structured and brought together in three broad themes, representing interviewees’ narratives of their attitudes to and experiences of writing (attitude to writing, writing in school, academic writing). The structuring in themes, including interviewee quotations, applied to all interviews in the same way by use of the fundamental functions of rapid copy, cut, and paste of the word-processing programme.

**Table 1. Student interviewees (n = 14) of four cohorts, November 2012–June 2016.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Individual interviews: Louise, Cohort 2 (C2).</th>
<th>Semester of studies (C2)</th>
<th>Group interviews: focus groups, Cohorts 1, 3, 4 (C1, C3, C4)</th>
<th>Semester of studies (C1, C3, C4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>L:1, October 15</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>C1:1 (4 students,) November 6</td>
<td>7th (final)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>L:2, January 28</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>C3:1 (7 students), October 14</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L:3, May 21</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>C3:2 (7 students), November 26</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>L:4, October 29</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>C3:3 (3 students), May 7</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>L:5, April 8</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>C3:4 (2 students), December 15</td>
<td>5th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L:6, October 6</td>
<td>7th (final)</td>
<td>C3:5 (4 students), May 21</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L:7, December 2</td>
<td>7th (final)</td>
<td>C4:1 (2 students), October 23</td>
<td>7th (final)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L:8, December 3</td>
<td>7th (final)</td>
<td>C3:6 (3 students), December 14</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Total 8 individual interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td>C3:7 (2 students) June 20</td>
<td>8th (final)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Louise (L:1-L:8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 focus groups,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13 students (12 female, 1 male)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third transformation concerned making sense by tying together what belongs together and creating a conceptual and theoretical context. The conceptual coding of data was adjusted to three more narrow categories of narratives: (1) private writing; (2) early processes of academic writing; and (3) developments in academic writing. The coded data was then reviewed and structured under the two research questions: (1) ECEC students’ perceptions of themselves as writers and (2) ECEC students’ understandings of doing academic writing.

In the following presentation, students in the focus groups are referred to by the respective cohort number, including for C3 the respective number of the seven interviews, that is, C3:3 refers to Cohort 3 and the third interview. Louise is referred to as L, including the number of the interview, that is, L:1–L:8.

**ECEC Students’ Perceptions of Themselves as Writers**

In the following presentation the timeline of the students’ perceived development as writers includes prior experiences, and early, midway and final stages of their education.

Among the students in our study, none had prior experience with higher education studies. They were mainly recruited from a vocational upper-secondary background, thus reflecting the statistical pattern of “first generation” ECEC students (Statistics Sweden, 2010, 2014; see also Bertilsson et al., 2008). Female students mentioned previous experiences of odd jobs in the service sector (child minder, nurse assistant, shop assistant, waitress), whereas the one male student had worked in the construction industry. Prior writing experiences were chiefly limited to school writing and a private diary (cf. Merry, 1979). Early experiences of writing in the ECEC programme included a variety of papers and presentations, including reading and giving feedback on the texts of other students. The assignments largely had a focus on the applied settings of early childhood: seminar assignments, formal written assignments (tests), home assignments, and literature reviews. For example, assignments on gender equity should include suggestions on how to apply gender awareness in the preschool (C2:1) and “problematise gender and ethnicity in preschool and school” (C3:1). However, the students in C4 were critical of the lack of focus on early childhood as “much of the literature is on secondary or upper secondary education” (C4:1).

The students in C4, who had participated in their final semester, suggested that the many assignments at the early stage of the programme had enhanced their motivation to study:

… it was very hard, but afterwards I think it was good, then you had to straighten yourself up and get into the studies … if you really wanted to continue and become a preschool teacher then you had to study. (C4:1)

The C3 students mentioned in their first interview an early assignment on “how to handle conflicts,” comprising about eight pages, a reference list, and “what headlines we should have,” (C3:1), that is, a template following the IMRaD model. Another early assignment was “a small investigation” (C3:2). As we can see, the variety in their writing constitutes different “acts of discourse” (Larson, 1992).

Reflection and critical thinking were mentioned as inextricable parts of writing. Louise considers reflection to be more “introverted and more what it means to me,” while critical thinking is “larger and occurs in a group” (L:2, L:3). Louise emphasises she has a specific interest in languages and writing (L:4). Writing is an important part of her identity, she claims (L:4). She kept a diary until her early-teens and writing is almost like a “family business”; her mother used to write letters and diaries, her grandparents enjoyed “crosswords and stuff and poems” (L:4). Her primary teacher was very “eager for us to write a lot” (L:4). Unlike Louise, none of the other students expressed a particular interest in writing.

Struggles the students mentioned with the first assignment exclusively oriented to ECEC (C1, C2) were about “doing” and writing up an observation study in early-childhood settings. It seemed that students in C3 already “knew” how to write academically; they referred to how studies in upper-secondary education included emphasis on how to write properly and organise a text (C3:1, C3:2, C3:4,
C3:6). It seemed as if the C3 students saw few difficulties concerning the demands of academic writing; “we thought it would be more hyped” (C3:1). Later on, academic writing was referred to as “boring” (C3:5).

After about one year of her studies, Louise had become aware of the importance of the FDP. In her first interview (autumn 2013), she says that it is brought up “quite incidentally, no deeper into it” (L:1). Later on, the FDP tends to be referred to as a forthcoming big task: “this is something to think about when you are about to write your final degree project” (L:3). Louise also mentions a small so-called “B-thesis” as preparatory work for the third semester; evidently, this assignment has been very important for Louise, which we will come back to:

Yes, it was very clear, that “from now on [the B-thesis] you start training on writing [for the FDP]; you will learn more by writing the results and not just the literature.” (L:3)

From early on, the students in C3 talked about the FDP as being similar to a bachelor thesis. They mentioned assignments that had prepared for the FDP; for example, the third semester included “a report aimed for the FDP” (C3:3), and an assignment entailing a literature review in the fifth semester (C3:5).

Midway through the programme, Louise feels confident in her writing when it comes to both the content and structure:

Now I can focus more on the content; more on the results than how to structure the result, really. (L:4)

But she also feels free to think and write “just straight up and down” in less academic terms (L4):

I write until I feel I got it down there. Then I sit and read it through, look at the literature, compare with friends and discuss with them a bit more in order to accurately get the analysis down on paper. (L:3)

At the final stage of the programme, she claims she now thinks and writes much more academically (L:6). Regarding her own trajectory, she identifies linkages between becoming a better writer (L:6), knowledge, and the development of a professional identity; “writing is an important part of me” (L:6), “I think very much more academically now,” and “this is me as a preschool teacher” (L:6).

While the C3 students from early on signal they feel comfortable with the academic demands, some find that writing in the programme has also helped develop their writing (C3:4, C3:6). However, the main concern revolves around which issues to explore and write about in the forthcoming FDP (C3:1, C3:5). In line with Louise, the students in C4 suggest that the process of writing the FDP includes both professional and personal development:

I think it is mainly about moving deeper into something we think is interesting. But then I also think that the main personal development is about how to write an essay, how to write nicely, how to share responsibilities. (C4:1)

In the process of writing up her own FDP, Louise suggests that academic writing is also about challenging earlier research; that “critical thinking” concerns the questioning of knowledge and attitudes, including what can be seen “behind or beyond.” (L:6)

**ECEC Students’ Understanding of Doing Academic Writing**

In the following, we present students’ developments in doing academic writing along the timeline of early, midway and final stages of the education programme.

At the early stage of the programme the students call for explicit teaching on academic writing. In Louise’s view (L:1, L:2), the university takes it for granted that students easily appropriate the written guidelines and rules:

… This [the lack of oral instructions] depends on what the university believes we already know about writing. (L:1)
Other students oriented to the preschool and the recreation centre similarly stressed they needed explicit teaching on how to write academically (C1, C4). Students in C1 put their struggles in academic writing this way:

To begin with, the instructions were largely “use the reference technique in the right way.” … You were supposed to clarify that the issue you wrote about originated from the literature. … And then you should analyze the study, but you should not have any opinions of your own! So we asked ourselves HOW to do this? We students had no experiences of writing in this way from upper secondary school. (C1:1)

The students in C4 commented in the following:

Since there is so much emphasis on writing, I absolutely think that the programme should include more lectures and workshops on academic writing. But we didn’t have that at all. (C4:1)

Midway through the programme, and concerning her own writing, Louise sees three stages, including moves between professional and academic dimensions: planning in discussions with student peers; writing on her own; and then turning to her aunt, her “peer reviewer,” and the main source for her of professional “know-how”:

She is like my little speaking partner when it comes to writing. (L:1)

In the “peer-review” stage, the central focus is on the contents and conclusions, not the text per se. Louise gradually shifts to go for the literature first, and then her aunt (L:2). Other support structures are various Internet forums and blogs by preschool teachers to obtain “a greater insight into the preschool profession when I cannot be there to see myself” (L:1). Louise describes a gradual move from oral discussions of the literature and individual experiences to “peer reviewing” of each other’s papers (L:3). Louise suggests she has become more confident in using literature and drawing on her own experiences and ideas. She links her “new” interest in academic text presentation to the previous assignment of writing up a specific B-thesis, including empirical data, in line with the templates of the FDP, that is, the IMRaD form. She knows “what is expected” (L:3).

The other students also stress development from individual to collaborative work, support for each other’s assignments, and the use of digital resources (Internet, Facebook groups, Google Docs), all in all providing input from both the academy and the professional field. The C3 students emphasise the impact of the mandatory template (IMRaD) for their different assignments (C3:3), and also seem to agree that an early literature review, as previously mentioned, was particularly important for the FDP (C3:6).

Macken-Horarik et al. (2006) see first-generation students’ engagement in everyday, academic, and professional discourse as crucial for moving between (“dialogue with”) and integrating different discourses. Implicitly, Louise suggests she has this ability to move between practicum in preschool and academic studies: For example, she understands that data selection for any study could be discussed in terms of representativeness – “It is what it looks like in preschool, right?” – including the fact that various children act differently in different contexts.

Students’ diaries in a practicum on “what happened to the children and so on,” along with their own reflections (L:4), differ widely from the professional writing in early childhood, including in the main planning, newsletters to parents, and the growing formal documentation on the individual child (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009; see also Sheridan et al., 2011). Louise mainly considers professional writing as “simple”, with the idea to get the key message through to all parents, irrespective of their cultural background (L:4):

You can’t write academically … there should be as much information as possible. And if parents are from different countries and speak different languages you must write it as simply as possible. (L:4)

Overall, the students pointed to an imbalance between academic writing and professional orientation, including the connection between the two (C1, C2, C3, C4).
In the final stage of their studies, at the time of starting the FDP, the four students in C1 exclaimed in one voice: "Academic writing is so difficult!" Somewhat different perspectives on writing emerged from the C3 students who wanted "to get better at writing properly" with the aims to develop their own teacher competence, for documentation and administration in the future workplace (C3:5).

As it appeared, in writing up their FDP the C3 students, like their student peers in C1 and C4, however, struggled with text and coherence and to transpose written instructions into writing, "we just have this data," as they put it, while academic writing is much more complex (C3:7).

In Louise’s own narrative, she has since early on in her studies adopted a role of transferring the academic contents to “outsiders who have not read this before” (L:1), that is, a kind of mediating role. When asked if she feels like an academic, Louise suggests she does, given the university-based programme:

If I go to university, I am an academic and I get academic credits. In private, I also feel like an academic because I will soon have a university education, while my friends do not have one. (L:3)

Louise (L:6) believes her ideas on professional work in early childhood and also her understanding of policies have developed – from seeing a policy document as the “truth,” at the end of the programme she considers them more as helpful guidelines (cf. Lind, 2001). She also points to a specific professional discourse, involving students and preschool teachers – including a submissive relationship to the policies.

The C3 students were more doubtful about whether they belonged to a wider “academic” community. Rather, they had “a sense of being further educated” (C3:3). At the time of finalising the programme, the undergraduate degree signified something vague, “far away” (C3:5). But in writing up their FDP, the students suggested they now espoused different roles, including themselves as teacher students, forthcoming teachers, and critical academics:

When writing I have sometimes felt that now I want to defend pupils in primary school and teachers .... But then I should also be a critical researcher. (C3:7)

What the students seem to express here is a tension between their understandings of pupils’ and teachers’ activities in “real” settings, including social solidarity and ethics as embedded in the vocational professions (see Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Burke, 2008; French, 2013) and the recommended “neutral” attitude of researchers in an academic discourse.

The FDP is understood as the given requirement for an academic degree (C3:6). Further, the students in C3 recognise the FDP as contributing to the “deepening” of the individual student’s knowledge (C3:3), providing “competence in an area” (C3:4), and “filling in a knowledge gap” (C3:5). It is also suggested that the FDP might contribute to an overall better recognition of teachers in society, as the given requirement for an academic degree: “you may not be a better teacher, but it raises the prestige of the teacher’s job” (C3:6). Louise sees her own completed FDP as being useful for students like herself, but also as a research-based contribution to the workplace; preschool teachers might be potential readers of her FDP provided they “take a look at final degree projects,” she suggests (L6). Students in C4 similarly consider the FDP as important in order to connect with one’s future career.

The Result in the Light of Previous Research

In this article we explore undergraduate students’ perceptions of academic writing in ECEC within the Swedish higher education system. The study indicates not only students’ differing perceptions on what academic writing is about, it also points out the importance of attitudes to writing as well as prior educational experiences of writing.

The study should be understood in the context of a nationally regulated vocational programme directly aimed at work in preschool, the preschool class, and the recreation centre. Drawing on new literacy studies (Barton et al., 2000; Burke, 2008; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007), views on what it means for students to “do” academic writing were collected in a
longitudinal study conducted over more than four years, including a total of 14 “first-generation” students in four different cohorts. Students’ ideas and experiences of academic writing were gained in nine focus groups and eight individual interviews. Centrally important to the discussion are Louise’s experiences of academic writing over almost three years, and whose perceptions were reflected in the other students’ narratives. From early on, the students recognised that the higher education environment entailed practising a variety of acts of discourses (Larson, 1992). They suggested that the university-based education had enhanced their critical thinking and self-reflection and was highly relevant to their future career, as in studies of social work students (Hughes et al., 2011; Rai, 2006). While Louise tended to adopt an academic habitus, that is, was proud of being a student at an academic institution, the other students were hesitant to position themselves as “academically” educated and, rather, adopted a vocational habitus (Colley et al., 2003). Louise expressed self-confidence in academic writing, suggesting that she could handle the different “bardic voices” (Sullivan, 1996, p. 223), whereas other students (C1, C4) tended to see academic writing as problematic throughout their studies. Louise also positioned herself as a student who developed academic capacities through academic writing, in contrast to the students in C3, who tended to see writing within their studies as foremost being a way to underpin their teaching competence (see Sheridan et al., 2011).

How can we understand the different perceptions of academic writing among the student interviewees? In response to the first research question, concerning: In what way do students’ perceptions of themselves as writers change in relation to the vocational and academic demands of the programmes? the students saw the development of their writing as being related to interpersonal relations in the writing process, including but not limited to socioacademic relations. The students’ perceptions are consistent with the findings of Lahn (2011) and Morton, Storch, and Thompson (2015), who emphasise the social nature of academic literacy, including a transition from individual to collective participation. Louise stands out from the other students by positioning herself as a writing person, including her perception of herself as someone who takes on responsibility to explain things in writing to others. In contrast to the other student participants, as well as the ECEC students in Karlsson Lohmander (2015), Louise does not seem to perceive theory as “abstract and distanced” and workplace-based knowledge as “concrete and real,” nor does she express an internal tension and conflict between a practice-oriented and a disciplinary account as the student nurses do in Baynham (2000). Instead, she proposes a mediating role between the professional and academic discourses. Interestingly, and in contrast to Lahn (2011), Louise expresses her desire to base her occupational practice not only on tacit skills required in the workplace, but also on the formal ECEC education. When students in C3 at the time of writing up their FDP find it challenging how to analytically relate to “real-life” data and separate loyalty and ethics embedded in the forthcoming profession from the academic demands of “neutrality”, we understand that they, in line with Northedge (2003), are identifying tensions between a professional and academic discourse.

In response to the second research question, concerning: Students’ understandings of what it means to “do” academic writing, the study indicated that students overall struggled to write according to guidelines, if provided. In Louise’s more in-depth portrayals of her writing process, it appeared as if she did not dwell on new conventions and concepts, but quickly connected to the given assignments, adopted the vocabulary and grammar, followed the given template, reference, and quotation techniques and so on. Louise’s presentation of herself as a writer differed considerably from other students’ self-perceptions. Students who were oriented exclusively to the field of ECEC (C1, C4) were more cautious and admitted they found it difficult to live up to the academic demands. They stated that they had suffered, and found the academic conventions oppressive relative to the formal entrance requirements for the vocational programme. Interestingly, among the student participants, academic writing was principally perceived as supporting professional writing, including the expansion of professional knowledge. In line with this, the FDP was seen as a research-based contribution to the workplace. These findings also align with our previous studies showing that a dominant perception is that academic writing in the ECEC programme is closely connected to the early
Limitations of the Study

Methodological limitations of this study concern the representativeness of the 14 student interviewees. We believe it is likely the students in this study are representative of ECEC students in Sweden, age gender, social and educational background, with reference to research and official Swedish statistics on recruitment patterns to the field (Bertilsson et al., 2008; Statistics Sweden, 2010, 2014). Also, given the persuasion needed to recruit the participants from among the about 160 students who were addressed, we find it less likely that those who had voluntarily signed up would represent students who had more definite ideas about academic writing than average ECEC students. Students’ contribution provided opportunities for them to reflect and communicate on the burning issue of academic writing. Participation could also be conceived as support for the individual student’s own writing.

A general methodological problem is that a longitudinal study creates bonds, and perhaps a willingness of the interviewee to meet explicit or implicit expectations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Powney & Watts, 1987). Another problem is that participants may not remember, for example, course content including literature, lectures, seminars, and discussions that are asked about in the study. Also, values and group norms might to a certain extent express differences in the students’ perception of themselves as writers and attitudes to academy and academic writing between the “collective thinking” in the focus groups and Louise’s individual thinking (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 300).

Concerning Louise’s contribution to the research, we can only speculate about the reasons she was willing to participate individually in a longitudinal study. Louise’s detailed narratives and self-presentations in eight individual interviews meant that she was relatively free to express herself without having to conform to other students’ ideas. She also singled herself out by identifying with both professional work as a preschool teacher and the academy (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Burke, 2008; French, 2013). Louise refers to an interest in writing per se; her participation might also have functioned as a “pep talk,” including a boost for her new identity as a university student. Evidently, Louise’s pursuits in academic writing are shaped by the ECEC programme, but to some extent also by her participation in our study.

Conclusions

Based on this study, we may conclude that the ECEC programme has an obvious impact on students’ development of academic literacies, including as forthcoming professionals in early childhood (cf. Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). None of the ECEC students in this study had prior experience of studies in higher education. All assignments had a focus on the applied settings of early childhood, while reflection and critical thinking at the early stage of the programme was experienced by the students as difficult, but enhanced their motivation to study. Written assignments in a variety of “acts of discourses” (Larson, 1992), all through the programme, seemed to enhance the students’ academic writing. There was also a gradual move from individual to collaborative work, including oral discussions to “peer reviewing” of each other’s papers. The students emphasised the mandatory template (IMRaD) as a supporting structure for their writing, and a perceived need of explicit teaching on how to write academically. Early on in the programme, they pointed to an imbalance between academic writing and professional orientation, including the connection between the two. In the final stage the students espoused different roles, including themselves as teacher students, forthcoming teachers, and critical academics.

The study suggests that academic writing is largely perceived among the ECEC students as a means to underpin the vocational field with theory (cf. Colley et al., 2003; Maton, 2009). The students see critical thinking and reflective practice as relevant to their future career (Abbott, 1988). Further, in contrast to research indicating that the academic thesis model (in similar settings in
Flanders) collides with the “finality” of the professionally oriented programmes, they find the academic IMRaD form helpful (Meeus et al., 2004, p. 319). A further conclusion is that students’ understanding of academic writing is situated in the particular professional field of early childhood, including its social context (Blomqvist, 2004; Hegender, 2010) which involves approval of social and ethical values embedded in “care” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; cf. Drudy, 2008). Further we suggest that students perceive the written FDP more as a social commitment, and therefore not entirely in line with the principle of being an academic statement for research purposes (cf. Svärd, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). Also, we contend that we can discern tacit ideas among the students on academic writing as an enactment of professional discourse (see also Erixon, Arreman, & Erixon, 2017) in contrast to studies in the UK on experienced teachers (Stierer, 2000a, 2000b) and experienced social workers (Rai, 2006).

During their writing and learning trajectories, ECEC students encounter perpetual types of “monitoring” (Foucault, 1991) or socialisation from teachers and supervisors who assess coursework and assign grades, and two-directional socialisation amongst students who provide feedback. Also, they encounter different academic, sometimes tacit, norms – epistemologies – including choices and decisions on what should and what should not be taken into account (Barton et al., 2000; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Louise’s high expectations of academic writing and her willingness to adapt to the norms, including capacities to act including to support student peers, indicate self-monitoring (Anderson, 2017; Foucault, 1991) and agency (Bourdieu, 1990). Thus, Louise, as “someone in education” (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010) appears to be willing to “dialogue with” different, salient discourses in the ECEC discourse domain (Macken-Horarik et al., 2006). The other students did not display the same sense of belonging to the academy. As we see it, the students in this study thereby display two kinds of habitus; Louise a more “professional habitus,” built on both a professional and academic discourse, her student peers with more of a vocational habitus, mainly based on a professional discourse (Northerd, 2003).

While in academic discourse nothing is to be taken for granted and arguments are separated from personal loyalties, early childhood teachers are expected to be loyal to the curriculum of “care,” including social solidarity and ethics in public service jobs (Andersson, 2013; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Hence, the identified tensions between professional and academic discourse in the ECEC programme may lead to new hierarchies, including new power relations (Bourdieu, 1990; Lillis & Scott, 2007) in the students’ future professional lives (and the early childhood profession) (see also Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Erixon & Erixon Arreman, 2017). Finally, whether the emphasis in Swedish policy on academic writing in the field of ECEC entails a step away from the early childhood value-laden profession, grounded in teaching competence, moral dimensions and care, that is, professional responsibility (Englund & Solbrekke, 2016), remains to be investigated.

Early Childhood Education and Care is a relatively new disciplinary field in higher education in Sweden and there are few studies about ECEC students’ academic writing. Implications of the findings, especially in terms of the programmes of ECEC, are that writing within the programme invites the ECEC students not only as consumers, but also producers of new academic knowledge, to an emerging academic interdisciplinary ECEC field. It is likely that genres of writing also adopted from a variety of academic disciplines, like sociology and history, may promote both academic and professional knowledge.

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