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The degree project in Swedish Early Childhood Education and Care – what is at stake?

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Abstract

This study deals with the undergraduate degree project in teacher training programmes for early childhood education and care in Sweden. For the study we draw on documents and qualitative interviews with teacher educators of different disciplinary backgrounds. The aims of this study were to identify discourses on the degree project in the field of early childhood education and care: (1) in documents; and (2) among teacher educators. Our study points to the tensions between discourses on the degree project as being of primary relevance for the vocational field, or as preparation for research activities. It also shows that varying perceptions on the degree project among teacher educators are largely related to different disciplinary fields. It further emerges that teacher educators have different views about text norms for the degree project, based on different underlying epistemologies to which the student teachers must adapt. We conclude that the multiple and often contradictory requirements of the degree project need critical examination and be reviewed. We also suggest an opening up for new and more creative ways of dealing with the degree project, with greater recognition of professional values and knowledges in the field.

Keywords: academic writing, student thesis, early childhood education and care, IMRaD, teacher education

Introduction

Writing is the primary artefact within the university; ‘norms’ of writing, as grounded in different epistemological and ontological perspectives and traditions, unite members in a particular field of science (Kruse 2006). Becher (1994) imagines that universities are made up of different tribes, each with its territory, including distinct clusters of language or ‘dialects’ and other symbolic ways to show how you are different from others; Sullivan (1996, 223) similarly speaks of an internal rhetoric or scientific “bardic voice” within a common area. Drawing on Becher, the field of teacher education (TE), including university-based programmes for early childhood education and care, belongs to the (fourth) cluster of the “soft and applied

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sciences” in which research and research development is about functionally training in professions.

This study deals with the undergraduate degree project in the Swedish context of teacher training for the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The field of ECEC includes two programmes aimed at professional work in the public service sectors of preschool and the leisure centre, respectively.¹ ECEC programmes are provided closely side by side within the university, under the umbrella of teacher education. In Sweden, like in many European countries, the upgraded training of teachers and pedagogical staff in the last few decades goes along with an increased emphasis on some kind of a degree project, which is often referred to as a student thesis (Neuman 2010). Within the general academisation of all teacher education programmes in Sweden in the 2000s (Kallós 2003), the degree project received increased attention from various stakeholders (Gustafsson 2008; Hartman 2012; Mattsson 2008a). For many students, the degree project constitutes a particular stumbling block (National Agency for Higher Education 1998; Bergqvist 2000; Gustafsson 2008). It also constitutes the needle’s eye for higher education institutions as their accreditation is increasingly based on the assessment of students’ degree projects (Haikola 2013). Today, since the alignment of Sweden in 2007 with the Bologna Accord, a master thesis is required for eligibility to postgraduate studies. In the 2000s, the ECEC programmes constituted one of the largest vocational fields in Swedish higher education, although it seems that few research studies, if any, have explicitly dealt with the degree project in the sector.

Against this backdrop, the aims of this study include identifying discourses on the degree project within the teacher education field of early childhood education and care, and how teacher educators of different disciplinary backgrounds perceive the degree project. For the study, we pose the following two questions:

1. Which policy demands are expressed for a final degree project in early childhood and care programmes?
2. What is the final degree project about, according to teacher educators?

Data for the study include policy documents and qualitative interviews with academic staff of different academic disciplinary fields, and who teach in the ECEC programmes at a big Swedish university. The two strands of teacher training in early childhood and care are hereafter referred to as the ECEC programmes. At the time of the study, the ECEC programmes were conducted within national statutes which applied since 2001, including minor revisions by way of alignment with the Bologna Agreement in 2007.

Teacher training for early childhood education and care

The two ECEC programmes emerge from the colleges or “seminars” established by the state in the 1960s at the time of women’s formal entrance to the labour market along with needs for institutionalised childcare (Johansson 1992; Holmlund 1996). Via university integration in the late 1970s, ECEC programmes constituted vocational programmes within the teacher education sector (SFS 1977:218). Currently, ECEC programmes are provided at around 25 universities and university colleges, and make up one of the five largest vocational fields in Swedish higher education. The programmes are financed by the state, and free for all students to attend. Similar to recruitment patterns in other countries (Larson 1979; Apple 1987), the ECEC programmes have over time almost exclusively recruited first-generation students, among whom the vast majority are women (Dahlberg et al. 1999; Statistics Sweden 2010, 2014). Reforms of the ECEC programmes in the last few decades have taken place along with national reforms for the integration of childcare services under education auspices, including legal access for all parents to day care for their children (Neuman 2010; Andersson 2013).

Under a national teacher education reform in 2001 (Gov. bill 1999:135), ECEC programmes, including the degree project, were prolonged in time. By aligning Swedish teacher education with the Bologna Accord in 2007, the idea of the undergraduate degree project has been to provide a bridge between education and the job market (Gunneng and Ahlstrand 2002; Knight and Yorke 2004). The ECEC programmes are framed both by national statutes for higher education and national and local statutes for teacher education, with a focus on knowledge and skills for application in professional practice (SFS 1993:100). At the time of this study, the ECEC programmes comprised 42 months of full-time studies, including a general field of studies encompassing the degree project, and various subject areas across the field of early childhood.

Professional and academic orientation of the degree project

While various terms for the degree project are used in different contexts,² it appears as a small thesis in the doctoral thesis model, it has come to serve as the prototype in the field of teacher education (Arnqvist 2008; Mattsson 2008a). Within the small thesis, two major models of a teaching-professional orientation and an academic orientation have been identified (Hesslefors Arktoft and Lindskog 2008). The professional approach advocates teacher education focused on preparation for professional work, where skills are linked to the profession. The academic orientation, with its focus on theory, research methodology and a critical approach, aims to prepare for research activities. While some of the teaching-professional-oriented models do not meet all demands of the academic world, such as sufficient documentation and critical reflection, the academic-oriented final thesis models do not meet all the demands of the teaching professionals either. It is claimed that preparatory studies

for a small thesis risk being conducted “at the expense of education that would favour learning processes related to actual professional practices and didactic skills” (Mattsson 2008b, 211). Meeus et al. (2004) found that the academic-oriented thesis model, as used in ECEC and primary teacher education in Flanders, collides with the finality of the professionally oriented programmes and can promote disinterest, discontent and cheating among students.

Schryrer (1994) brings to the fore similar tensions that may arise in writing in veterinary education which is aimed at both theoretical work and is clinically, practically oriented. In scientific and experimental theses, veterinary students often use a variety of the so-called IMRAD form (Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis, Discussion) by Schryrer (113) called the IMRDS form (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Summary). With an orientation to practice and problem-solving, writing is often conducted according to another model called the Problem Oriented Veterinary Medical Record (POVMR). Epistemologically, the IMRDS form expresses the need to organise and control the world, while the POVMR model reflects the practitioner’s inability to select and simplify problems and their consequent need to respond to problems as they arise and develop, according to Schryrer.

As it seems, studies on how undergraduate students assimilate literacy practices for academic writing have mainly focused on different disciplinary practices and not, as in the case of ECEC, an applied interdisciplinary vocational education. In traditionally ‘non-vocational’ disciplines, students seem to rapidly assimilate the literacy practice of the respective field (North 2005). In the Arts/Humanities disciplines, the narrative dimension, including an interest in concrete events and participants, is valued most highly (Biber 1991). Further, writing for Arts students is a lengthy process involving many drafts and revisions, and knowledge is seen as perspective-dependent, constructed and disputed. Both History and English students are likely to punish a reproductive orientation (Lea and Street 1998). Social Science students emphasise critical thinking, oral and written examinations, and analysis and synthesis of course content (Paulsen and Wells 1998). Science students are less likely to regard textual structure as problematic and have a different relation to writing, often resulting in one revision only. The Natural Science text is generally organised into sections, arranged in points, is brief and aims to avoid ‘waffle’, i.e. irrelevance; science students mention having to ‘pad out’ in order to achieve the required text length (Biber 1991). Writing in the Natural Sciences is considered to be about facts and getting the ‘right answers’. Disciplines characterised by a disciplinary consensus with students more likely to believe in absolute knowledge than their Social Science and Arts counterparts. In their need to understand facts and figures and describe experiments, they require modest writing skills, according to Neumann (2001). Interestingly, senior researchers in the applied sciences may demonstrate greater openness vis-à-vis alternative ways of regarding things and a more relativistic view of research and knowledge. In this context, they could also represent a kind of epistemological boundary crosser (Erixon 2011).

Conceptual framework

According to Bernstein (2000), scholarly and professional knowledge represents a *vertical* discourse; a “specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge” (2000, 160). Within vertical discourse, Bernstein distinguishes between “hierarchical” (as within the natural sciences) and “horizontal” (as within the humanities and social sciences) knowledge structures. Hierarchically organised knowledge is signified by a “coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure” (2000, 160); here knowledge develops by the integration and subsuming of previous knowledge of lower levels. In horizontal structures, knowledge develops by adding on segments of differing topic areas; it is dependent on a specific social context and does not necessarily have relevance in other contexts. For Maton (2009), the more the meaning of knowledge is situated in a social and cultural context of acquisition and use, the stronger its *semantic gravity*. We further draw on the concept of “vocational habitus”; following Colley et al. (2003) vocational habitus works in a disciplinary way to make individuals, including teachers and students, adopt the attitudes, beliefs and values of a specific vocational culture.

Becher (1994) distinguishes four principal intellectual “clusters” in academia, each of which has its unique epistemological and ontological point of departure and tradition. The *first* cluster consists of ‘hard’ pure (natural) science, e.g. Physics, and is cumulative, atomistic, and universal, quantitatively oriented and accounts for results in the form of discoveries and explanations. The *second* cluster consists of so-called soft pure Arts disciplines (such as History) and pure Social Science disciplines (such as Anthropology). The second cluster takes an interest in the holistic, particularity, and in qualities and complexity. The *third* cluster consists of ‘hard’ applied science (technologies such as Mechanical Engineering) and is pragmatic and practical. Finally, the *fourth* cluster consists of the ‘soft’ applied sciences such as Education. It is functional, power-oriented and occupied with levels of performance of (semi)-professions.

Academic writing comprises not one, but several discourses and literacies that are connected to their respective disciplines and epistemologies (Becher 1994; Sullivan 1996; Kruse 2006). Academic discourses are, according to Northedge (2003), united by their aspiration to theory building and research, and claims to separate a speaker’s arguments from social position, personal loyalties, institutional goals and immediate crises. Ideas are judged independently of speaker and context, which of course can be questioned. Instead of responding to immediate pressures of daily action, participants address themselves to measured, reflective written exchanges. Nothing in academic discourse is to be taken for granted. Everything must be questioned, particularly that which seems normal and natural. Another, professional discourse in ECEC emphasises other values of care, social solidarity and ethics that the students are supposed to absorb and perform (Drudy 2008), whereas any debate is expected to take place with the proper authorities in charge (Northedge 2003).

With a socio-cultural perspective, researchers in the field of New Literacy Studies highlight that perceptions of academic literacies are changing along with changes in society (Barton et al. 2000; Ivanič 2004; Lea and Street 1998; Burke 2008; French 2013). Academic literacies and discourses on writing are seen as embedded in academic contexts as well as social practices; academic writing is considered to have social purposes and values which include students' personal knowledge and feelings. Different discourses on academic writing as related to different values, beliefs and practices promote different academic styles of writing (Ivanič 2004). The academic institutions involved are regarded as sites of discourse and power; the different contexts hold implications for which subjects can be treated, the organisation of the texts, their tone and approach, the level of details etc., including to whom they are addressed (ibid. 2004; Lea and Street 1998). The ways in which academic staff teaching in ECEC talk about writing and learning to write, and the actions they take as teachers, we interpret, to quote Ivanič (2004, 220), as "instantiations of discourses of writing and learning to write".

The Study

This study consists of two parts: (1) a study of documents, including policy documents, evaluations, and research studies and research overviews on the final degree project; and (2) an interview study conducted with 17 teacher educators. The interviewees had different disciplinary backgrounds and were affiliated with different disciplinary fields; all were teaching ECEC undergraduate students. The interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2014 at one of Sweden's largest universities with experience in ECEC programmes since they were established early in the 1960s.

1) Document study

The ECEC programmes, along with other vocational programmes (dentistry, nursing, primary teacher education, social work etc.) which were previously conducted at post-secondary level, were formally included in the university system in 1977 (SFS 1977:218). General objectives for vocational programmes were that they should be conducted with a scientific approach to knowledge, and prepare for work in different trades or professional areas. By a subsequent higher education reform in the early 1990s, a degree project became mandatory for ECEC programmes as within the vocational sector (Gov. bill 1992/1993:1). In line with the 1977 higher education reform, the 1993 reform emphasised the orientation of vocational programmes to the future profession; preceding parliamentary discussions (Swedish Parliament 1993) emphasised needs for the development of independent and critical thinking and problem-solving competencies. According to the national statutes, the degree project

should be similarly professionally oriented and link to scientific theories relevant to the profession, and which students come across in the programme:

For a degree, the student must present a final degree project in which the scientific theories that the student has been acquainted with during the time of studies should be related to the future profession (SFS 1993:100, Appendix 3, 393).

The scope in time for the degree project in vocational programmes was not specified; in practice, it came to vary between 7.5 or 15 ECTS credits in teacher education (Gustafsson 2008). A Professional Qualification Award was issued for a completed vocational undergraduate programme, and a General Qualification for the “non-vocational” field (Kim 2002). For a General Qualification, the individual student could assemble different courses according to certain requirements (ibid.), including “a small thesis or the like” (Gustafsson 2008, 21) respectively of 10 and 20 weeks of full-time studies. These degree projects are traditionally referred to as a Bachelor or Master thesis and are conducted as in-depth studies after at least 12 months of full-time studies in the particular discipline. Parallel to a curriculum reform, a new system of financing and governing of higher education was introduced (Gov. bill 1992/1993:100). Funding of undergraduate studies was subsequently based on numbers of recruited students and student performance, and quality control of local institutions and programmes was to take place by examinations and the assessment of undergraduate courses by audit teams (Kim 2002; Haikola 2013; Swedish Higher Education Authority 2014).

Under a following national teacher education reform (valid between 2001 and 2011), the degree project across the teacher education field was prolonged to ten weeks of full-time studies (15 ECTS credits) (Gov. bill 1999/2000:135; SFS 2001:23). In a preceding parliamentary report, it was suggested that the new, dual purposes of the degree project should prepare for *development work within the profession* and also provide a *basic qualification for postgraduate studies* in the field of teacher education (Ministry of Education 1999, 16). The revised Higher Education Ordinance which applied to the 2001/2011 teacher education programmes (SFS 1993:100, Appendix 2) continuously emphasises an orientation to the professional field, along with the utilisation of research-based knowledge for further development of the teacher profession:

The student should demonstrate the ability to critically and independently utilise, systematise and reflect on both her/his own and others’ experiences and relevant research in order to contribute to the development of the profession and the development of knowledge in subjects or subject fields (SFS 1993:100, Appendix 2).

No specifications were added concerning the degree project in the national Higher Education Ordinance. At the local, university level, brief requirements on a research

connection for the ECEC programmes were specified so that students should acquire “knowledge on a scientific basis of current research issues or topics” (Local Degree Ordinance 2010).³ A national mapping of the degree projects within the 2001 reform showed that they were differently organised as well as differently placed in time, and with varying academic emphases (Arnqvist 2008). At the time, degree projects were often supervised by teacher educators who were recruited from the professional field, but were not trained researchers (Gustafsson 2008; cf. Johansson 1992). Evaluations conducted by the National Agency for Higher Education found that the first cohorts of degree projects in the traditionally non-university-based teacher education programmes (including ECEC, Primary teacher education, and so-called Practical Aesthetical subjects) had a weak academic standing in comparison with bachelor theses (in Psychology and Business studies) (Forsberg and Lundgren 2006; cf. National Agency for Higher Education 2006). The implicated teacher education institutions were criticised for their weak connection to research structures, including few teachers holding a doctoral degree (National Agency for Higher Education 2008). Gradually, by the 2001 teacher education reform, new research structures had developed at institutions that provide teacher education; the new research discipline of Educational Work was set up at a handful of universities; other new disciplines with an orientation to specific school subjects include, for example, Chemistry didactics, History didactics and Mathematic didactics (Erixon Arreman 2008; Reimers 2014; Vinterek and Arnqvist 2014).

So, as it appears, overall the degree project in ECEC, as framed by wider structures of teacher education, similarly tends to be thought of and conducted as a ‘small thesis’ on the doctoral thesis model, and principally similar to a bachelor thesis (Gustafsson 2008; Mattsson 2008a; Råde 2010, 2014a, 2014b). What then signifies a bachelor thesis in Sweden? A national assessment of bachelor theses (in History and Economics) conducted by Professor Kjell Härnqvist in the late 1990s showed that the qualities and models differed considerably, within and between universities, for example in their purposes, use of sources and number of student writers (Härnqvist 1999). All supervisors had a PhD, including large numbers of full professors and associate professors. In both disciplines, a high student performance in upper secondary education correlated with a good quality bachelor thesis. In the mid-2000s, three major bachelor thesis models, including different forms of supervision and assessment, were identified⁴ (National Higher Agency for Education 2007).

In summary, the ECEC programmes are by definition vocational programmes. National specifications on the degree project in the ECEC programmes have been brief over time, including no specification concerning its form and model. The degree project should, however, have a clear professional orientation. Prior to the alignment with the Bologna Accord, it should also provide a platform for postgraduate studies. In the 2000s, we can identify tensions around the degree project as representing both a professional discourse and an academic discourse.

2) The interview study

In this second section, we present and analyse teacher educators' perceptions of the degree project. Qualitative, individual interviews with 17 teacher educators were collected in 2013 and 2014 at one of Sweden's largest higher education institutions. The digitally recorded and fully transcribed interviews were about 40 minutes long.

At the university where this study was conducted, the degree project in ECEC programmes is conducted individually or in pairs. A principal starting point is that students set up and conduct a small study of relevance to the professional field; the empirical data draw on a small set of interviews, observations or questionnaires; the study is reported in the form of a small thesis. Supervision including assessment of the degree project is provided at different departments that contribute to the ECEC programmes. For example, a degree project on early mathematics can be supervised and assessed at the Department of Applied Educational Sciences, or at the Department of Mathematics and Science Didactics. In the last few years, teachers with a PhD (sometimes also doctoral students) have exclusively functioned as supervisors and examiners; the role of supervisor and examiner/assessor is kept apart. The recommended structure for the degree project follows the so-called IMRaD structure, originally an acronym for Introduction, Method, Result and Discussion, but nowadays and in a more established structure involving introduction, aims and research questions, literature review, collection of interviews, observations or questionnaires, methods, results, analysis and discussion. The IMRaD structure is the most prominent norm for the structure of a scientific journal article of the original empirical research type, and in line with the APA style (Madigan et al. 1995; Sollaci and Pereira 2004).

The interviewees (9 female, 8 male) were all experienced teacher educators with different academic degrees and disciplinary backgrounds, including Aesthetic subjects and Languages, such as within the Humanities; Mathematics and Natural Sciences and Educational Sciences.⁵ They were affiliated with four departments. In the following, the terms senior and junior teachers refer to teacher educators who hold a PhD or an undergraduate degree, respectively. Among the four junior teachers, two had an undergraduate degree in an ECEC programme; two in primary education, including a licentiate degree of one of the primary teachers. Among the 13 senior teachers, a few had a professional degree within ECEC programmes, others had teacher degrees for primary, secondary and/or upper secondary school. The independent degree project was exclusively supervised and assessed by the senior teachers, while the junior teachers taught other courses. Details of the interviewees including academic position, gender, teaching orientation(s) and disciplinary field are presented in Table 1. The interviewees are referred to alternatively as academic staff, teachers or teacher educators.

Table 1. The 17 informants: academic position, gender, teaching field and disciplinary background

Academic position and fictitious name	Gender	Teaching field (subject area(s) and teacher education orientation)	Disciplinary background
Junior A	F	Mathematics; ECEC and primary school	Primary teacher
Junior B	F	Mathematics; ECEC and primary school	Preschool teacher
Junior C	F	Pedagogy and socialisation; ECEC and primary school	Preschool teacher
Junior D*	F	Early literacy, ECEC and primary school	Primary teacher; Licentiate* in Educational work
Senior A	F	Pedagogy and socialisation; ECEC, primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Preschool teacher; PhD in Educational Work
Senior B	F	Applied natural sciences; secondary, upper secondary school	Secondary/upper secondary teacher, PhD in a natural science subject
Senior C	M	Maths; compulsory school	Primary and secondary teacher; PhD in Educational Work
Senior D	F	Maths, pedagogy and socialisation; ECEC and compulsory school	Primary and secondary teacher; PhD in Educational Work
Senior E	M	Pedagogy and socialisation; ECEC and primary school	Preschool teacher; PhD in Educational Work
Senior F	M	Maths; primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Secondary/upper secondary teacher; PhD in Applied Mathematics
Senior G	M	Maths; primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Secondary/upper secondary teacher; PhD in Applied Mathematics
Senior H	M	Applied natural sciences; primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Secondary/upper secondary teacher; PhD in an applied natural science discipline
Senior I	M	Applied natural sciences, pedagogy and socialisation; ECEC, primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Secondary/upper secondary teacher; PhD in a natural science discipline
Senior J	M	Pedagogy and socialisation; independent degree project; ECEC and primary school	Preschool teacher; PhD in Educational Work
Senior K	F	Pedagogy and socialisation, aesthetic subject; ECEC, primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Teacher in an Aesthetics subject; PhD in History of Ideas
Senior L	F	Pedagogy and socialisation, aesthetic subject; ECEC, primary, secondary, upper secondary school	Teacher in an Aesthetics subject; PhD in Pedagogy
Senior M	M	Swedish and Nordic languages; ECEC and upper secondary school	Secondary/upper secondary teacher; PhD in Languages

* A licentiate degree is an academic degree ranking between a master's degree and a doctor degree.

The interview questions concerned professional and academic backgrounds; perceived relations between professional orientation, writing and science; experiences of students' approaches to writing and feedback; purposes and addressees of the student thesis; the role of the author; experiences and perceptions of the IMRaD structure; what is a good student degree project; perceived shared or conflicting ideas among colleagues.

The following sections are based on the answers to three of the 20 interview questions, i.e. which textual norms the teachers express, their view on the IMRaD form and, finally, what they think characterises a good degree project.

Different text norms

Generally, for senior teachers the degree project concerns the structure, form and good writing of a small thesis. With some exceptions, it was claimed that it was important that colleagues at the particular department as well as staff in other departments across the university had a shared view on the degree project. The different views, as recognised by Senior A (Educational Sciences), mostly concerned meanings of concepts and headlines such as 'analysis and critical review'.

When the question explicitly concerns text norms, the IMRaD form etc. a more varying picture emerges. Senior M, in the linguistics field (Humanities), noted that when discussing with his colleagues they seem to agree how an independent work should be organised. But, when the final product is presented, the ideas of what is a good degree project may differ significantly, he said. In line with this, Senior K (Humanities) 'understood' that at her new department of Aesthetics subjects, the results and outcome of an independent work are generally more important and "the language [is] less important". She also recalled that at her former department within the Humanities they did not, for example, talk about "result" as within the Aesthetics department, and other departments oriented specifically to teacher education. Senior K seemed not to have really calibrated her assessment instrument with those at the Aesthetics department yet:

It's still these two cultures [that I am part of]. I can sometimes think that this is a good essay, but then I can see that the results are somewhat doubtful and I have assessed in a different way than those who have worked in this department much longer than I have. (Senior K)

Likewise, Senior L (Educational Sciences) 'understood' that many students choose to write their essay at the Aesthetics department because they 'know' that, in relation to the generally stricter scientific rules at other institutions, more freedom in writing applies here. When it comes to the norms of writing, Senior L was pragmatic:

I point out for the students that there are different traditions in different subjects and also what system to choose, and when it comes to referring to sources and citations there are also different ways of doing it, in different places. (Senior L)

Along with other teachers at the Aesthetics department, she also accepted that the students do creative work as a degree project. This normally involves two parts or sections: one creative, or as she said a didactic part, and one reflective and analytical part, manifested in a written text in some form.

Some senior teachers in natural sciences didactics recalled that there had previously been a number of conflicts among teachers around writing, but claimed that such conflicts have since been solved. Senior C, with a PhD in educational work in mathematics didactics, said:

We discuss it at the meeting so it does not feel like there is so much discrepancy like that, relatively not. We are talking in agreement. (Senior C)

However, Senior F, who is also in the field of natural sciences didactics, admitted that the differences are always there. In accordance with his scientific training, he likes “bullets and clarity” and a short thesis of not more than 20 pages. One of his natural sciences colleagues, Senior G, found that for some of his department colleagues, who implicitly come from other departments or disciplines, it seems to be important to write “a lot of text”. Instead, for him it is important to quickly find the issue and the results, and how the results are based on the work conducted. Senior D (Educational Sciences), was very outspoken about the conflicts that have existed and maybe still exist below a polite surface. If you come from a natural sciences culture you “do not think it’s so important to write, it is a kind of frippery”, she claimed.

For Junior C and Junior B, the degree project is also principally concerned with “how students express themselves in writing”, and textual “superficial things”. The different perceptions of the degree project among teacher educators, according to Junior C, are not about the form, but the requirements teachers impose on students – “the depth of the task”. She found that the content knowledge for the degree project seems to be subordinated to the form of writing.

I think the students are struggling too much with the structure and form of writing so that the content will suffer. (Junior C)

Junior A noted that writing has become a major topic in the staff room. This has, however, also led to discussions that are “not so much about their [students’] subject knowledge”. She claimed that many other issues of importance for the profession, such as professional values, knowledge content and teaching skills, have ended up more in the background.

Why are we not talking about teachers’ skills and practical know-how in the classroom?
(Junior A)

Thus, the interviewees were aware of the considerably different views on the degree project in ECEC as related to different disciplinary backgrounds. The different ideas

concern norms for how an academic text should be organised; involving what parts it should consist of. In various ways it emerged that the requirement of ‘clarity’, the need to write ‘lots of text’, pragmatic solutions etc. are expressions of different underlying epistemologies to which the student teachers must adapt. Moreover, the junior teachers seemed to think that the students’ writing takes time and effort away not only from other important, implicitly more important parts of the ECEC, but also from the discussions teachers have among themselves. For them, writing seemed to be related to the theoretical and the more abstract, in contrast to practical know-how.

IMRaD structure

All of the interviewed teachers put forward the benefits of the IMRaD form for the degree project. Senior M from a language department, who has a quantitative focus in his own research, said he always takes his starting point in the IMRaD form when he introduces students to academic writing. There was, however, also implicit doubt among some of the teachers. Senior J (educational sciences) suggested it “sometimes would be nice to be able to allow a freer form than the IMRaD”. Senior L, from an Aesthetics department, did not wholly embrace the IMRaD form, which she considered is “a bit like that”. While she suggested that the IMRaD model might be the easiest way for many students to stick to, she preferred a “threefold form”, with an introduction, a body of text and a conclusion, for “more freedom on the basis of subject and content to organise a text”. She encourages her students to choose a form which is “comfortable” for their work.

Senior K, from the same department, was neither entirely comfortable with the interpretation of the IMRaD form.

The senior teachers in the natural sciences are less interested in form. Senior H was also a little unsure of what kind of form we were talking about. He further found that the degree projects tend to be too wordy:

I think that we in this business put too much emphasis on the introduction of literature because it can disturb me sometimes, to feel that ‘I am not writing for professional readers’. It would be quite nice sometimes if you do not need to explain everything. (Senior H)

Senior H also rejected “unnecessary digressions and unnecessary chatter”, and considered reference to a school of thought as a “sinecure”. In contrast, Senior M from the Humanities wanted a strong research background, for him a start in the wider picture should lead to the aims and objectives for the particular study; a theory section should be integrated into the research background, and the method should involve a discussion of the ethical approaches, including the generalisability or validity of the study. Senior D (educational sciences) thought that the IMRaD form is inside her, but not that “Aah now I have to think about the different parts, no”; she

does not explicitly convey this form to the students. Senior J (educational sciences) thought that there are text parts that do not fit anywhere; sometimes it would be nice to be able to allow a freer form, he said. Junior B believed that the form is needed and that the students would otherwise write in more personal way, which she calls “in a narrative flow”. The IMRaD forces students to go back and forth in their writing and analysing, she stressed.

In summary, we can notice that the 17 teachers in general have adapted to the IMRaD form as a way to scaffold students’ writing and structure their degree project. However, with the exception of Senior M, they do not explicitly teach about the form. The science teachers’ lack of interest in a literature review can be seen as a manifestation of cumulative disciplinary ideals shining through, where there is consensus on theories and methods and where different perspectives, as in an overview of the field, are therefore not necessary. An Aesthetics teacher’s open hesitance regarding and imprecise notions of the IMRaD form express other epistemologies, built more on creativity and experimentation, as also expressed in her interest in various creative forms. The junior teachers lack such a model because they do not belong to any “academic tribe”, as Becher (1994) suggests, in the same way as the senior teachers do.

A good degree project

For Senior J (Educational Sciences) a good degree project should contribute to the ideas of the work and make it clear and understandable, i.e. the form and content should be clothed in a language that is easy to understand and not “hyperbolic”. It should include background and key theoretical concepts. Senior A (Educational Sciences) shared these ideas, and also emphasised a discussion where everything is “tied together” to constitute a “knowledge contribution” to the research field. Senior E (Educational Sciences) stressed the importance of a clear problem and research purpose, and a “job that gives a boost” in contrast to a “description straight up and down”. Senior K (Humanities; Aesthetics) wanted a “balanced disposition”, not too much theory or too much empirical data just lined up in a row. Instead, she wanted a “thick description”:

You start by constructing theory and perspective, you go down into the empirical data, and then you climb up and use the theories to cross-fertilise it. The discussion is to see what you did and what could have been done differently. (Senior K)

Senior C (Educational Sciences) underlines personal experience and “flesh and blood” as being important. Similarly, Senior D (Educational Sciences) believes that the student must have a “burning interest” in the issue being treated. Among the natural science based teacher educators, Senior B spoke about the need to fill a “knowledge gap” and that the results should be compared to previous research in the

area. Everything should be communicated straightforwardly, “sparsely and without gaps”; the degree project should be assessed on its own merits, and the knowledgeable reader will be able to see if the work is well done and if it follows scientific principles. Senior H said it should be a sustainable piece of work, even if there are combinations of theories.

Senior L (Educational Sciences) of an Aesthetics background stated there is a need to highlight overall pedagogical questions, such as how kids have it in preschool and the early years in school. A good independent work, according to her, should give new insights and also open the eyes of readers who are not themselves in the field.

Coming from the Humanities and a specialisation in Linguistics, Senior M emphasised that a good independent work should have a strong research background that motivates, starts in the large and argues toward the objective and the issue so there is a scientific argument explaining the need to do a new study. According to him, the theory section should be integrated in the research background, and the method must involve a discussion of the ethical approaches and the generalisability or validity of the study.

Junior C “thinks without knowing” that the degree project is principally assessed by its form, and fears that the contents are too much in the background; “I think the students are struggling a lot with the form so that the contents are suffering”. Junior A similarly stressed the importance of the contents; she wants content that is exciting and relevant so students do not explore something you already know. Junior D thought it is difficult to say what a good degree project is about, but stressed that a good piece of work should follow the “model”, i.e. the IMRaD form.

To summarise the teacher educators’ definitions of an exemplary degree project, a common trait as mentioned by the majority is that it should be “relevant to the professional field”, and be “creative” “interesting” and “exciting”. It should also be concisely written and well structured. The quality of writing was repeatedly emphasised as important; several comments on text norms were repeated or expressed in slightly different words. The junior teachers largely shared a similar perspective, but were critical of what they understood as the supremacy of form, whereas the content had less meaning. A somewhat different voice in the chorus is represented by Senior M, who asked for a strong research background. He indicated that, to a greater extent than the perceived norms, he wants the ECEC students to take their starting points from a research field rather than from practice.

Analysis and discussion

In this article, we have identified and discussed issues of the final degree project in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden, as related to policies on higher education and teacher education, including national and local policy levels. This includes a glimpse of teacher educators’ conceptions of

the degree project. We can see that the degree project in ECEC is framed by increasing demands for skills and performance in 'academic writing', along with multiple statutes and requirements concerning skills and knowledge for professional work in the public service sectors of care and out-of-school activities for the young.

We have shown that the formal regulations for the degree project are brief and vague. In response to the first research question, concerning: (1) *the national and local policy demands for the degree project in ECEC programmes*, our document investigation shows that the focus of the degree project as within national statutes should concern issues of professional relevance, while making no demands about the form (SFS 1993:100; SFS 2001:23). In addition, it shows that, prior to the 2000s, the degree project was not nationally regulated in scope, while later it was formally regulated to be equalised in time to ten weeks of full-time studies. It also indicates that the degree project at teacher education institutions (Arnqvist 2008), along with evaluators and researchers in the field, tends to be seen as a written small thesis, largely in line with a PhD thesis (Forsberg and Lundgren 2006; Mattsson 2008a; Råde 2010, 2014a, 2014b) with the aim of facilitating the transition of graduate student teachers to postgraduate studies. There also tends to be cemented conceptions of the degree project as being principally similar to a bachelor thesis as conducted as in-depth studies in non-vocational disciplines, even though there are no such 'fixed' norms (Härnqvist 1999; Kim 2002). Our study further indicates that struggles to adopt a small thesis model have tended to result in "shame and blame" for ECEC programmes (Forsberg and Lundgren 2006; Gustafsson 2008).

However, official documents and statutes on ECEC programmes after 2007 have not supported an academic orientation of the degree project. Further, current statutes for higher education clearly differentiate between a *degree project* at undergraduate and graduate levels, a *scientific paper* at the licentiate level, and a *thesis* at doctoral level (National Agency for Higher Education 2010, 13).

Moreover, our study shows that the teacher educators share the view of the degree project being an academic course which must satisfy national and local prescriptions and be connected to the professional field. In response to the second research question, concerning (2) *What is the degree project about* according to the teacher educators in our study, they seem to connect the degree project with a Bachelor thesis, and the IMRaD form as a relevant structure providing stability and security in the students' writing up of the degree project. Interestingly, junior teachers mention contradictions between academic writing skills and the professional purposes, but the senior teachers do not. The teacher educators have all principally embraced the idea of the degree project as a small thesis. The differing views concern the purposes,

norms and practices of the degree project, including how much text and what parts the degree project should consist of. We see their varying perceptions as being related to their different disciplinary backgrounds. Requirements for ‘clarity’, ‘lots of text’, pragmatic solutions etc. are also, as shown, expressions of different underlying epistemologies to which the student teachers must adapt.

Like in the UK, in Sweden the widened access of first-generation students to higher education in the last few decades has led to a standards debate on the quality of academic writing (Forsberg and Lundgren 2006; French 2013). In professional programmes, universities must deal with both academic knowledge and employability skills (Steven and Fallows 1998; Knight and Yorke 2004). The large vocational ECEC programmes constitute an important basis for the funding of higher education institutions, and for the provision of professional staff to the public service sectors. Despite this, the degree project in vocational programmes like ECEC seems to be a neglected issue in research and wider debates. Ideas on the degree project in ECEC tend to principally align with academic discourse on the degree project as primarily a platform for students’ direct-next-step-entrance into a research community.

A seemingly taken-for-granted starting point at the local institution was that the degree project should be based on an empirical study with a focus on the professional field, written up in the form of a small thesis, follow the IMRaD structure, and correspond to the demands of a bachelor thesis. If training in writing according to the norms of a small thesis, or the like, should be more in focus for students in ECEC programmes, the professional cores need to be set aside (Hesslefors Arktoft and Lindskog 2008; Mattsson 2008b).

We can see that students’ writing in ECEC is deeply enmeshed in wider power relations which prescribe that ‘non-traditional’ students in professional higher education programmes should frame their understanding exclusively in terms of academic knowledge (Barton et al. 2000; Ivanič 2004). Academic conventions on student theses tend to exclude many students who risk hesitating about ‘fitting in’ on both structural and emotional levels (Burke 2008). ECEC programmes belong to the fourth cluster of the ‘soft and applied sciences’ in which research and research development is about functionally training in professions (Becher 1994). As a vocational field, not a pure academic discipline, the ECEC programmes are therefore not an academic “tribe” (Becher 1994). Since the subject contents in ECEC programmes draw on a multiplicity of disciplines, within different scientific faculty areas of different traditions, and are taught by teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds, ECEC education is to be understood as an interdisciplinary field or “reservoir” (Wolff 2013). ECEC students do not have one unique “bardic voice” (Sullivan 1996) to conform to, but several competing voices to listen to and imitate. There is reason to believe that

it takes a longer time and requires a bigger struggle for students in vocational programmes, like ECEC, to assimilate a literacy practice than in a single discipline (Biber 1991; Lea and Street 1998; Paulsen and Wells 1998; Neumann 2001; cf. North 2005). However, one can also imagine that teacher educators in the context of the ECEC programme can re-evaluate and develop their perceptions of academic writing, and thus cross epistemological boundaries (Erixon 2011).

But ECEC students not only have different academic discourses to relate to, but also a predominant professional care discourse which comprises other social meanings and identities, including different linguistic practices (Ivanič 1998). The profession, around which multiple academic perspectives are situated, like language issues, learning issues, IT issues, gender issues, social issues etc., represents the core of ECEC. A particular “vocational habitus” (Colley et al. 2003) as promoted within the ECEC programme includes specific attitudes, beliefs and values of relevance to the profession.

In vocational fields such as ECEC, knowledge develops by adding on segments of differing topic areas, which Bernstein (2000) calls horizontal knowledge structures, that are related to a specific social context, and not necessarily of relevance in other contexts. The more the meaning of knowledge is situated in a social and cultural context of acquisition and use, the stronger its *semantic gravity* (Maton 2009). Horizontal knowledge structures, like in ECEC, do not encourage gap spotting and gap filling as in a traditional disciplinary way (cf. Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). Segmented knowledge-building requires contextualising to be intelligible, i.e. the social context needs to be described and explained, which requires longer texts. Such texts can be judged as more descriptive, in contrast to shorter texts which similarly can be judged as more analytical. In such a comparison, the analytical is regarded as more academic than the descriptive. Therefore, teachers’ comments on how long texts can and should be are also a matter of scientific values and epistemologies.

We suggest that the degree project in Swedish ECEC should be a focus of both research and debate. The multiple and often contradictory demands on ‘academic writing’ should be critically examined in order not to collide with the finality (Meeus et al. 2004; French 2013) or bring tension (Schryer 1994) into ECEC education. We question whether it is ethically, professionally and academically just that decisions on the form and contents of the degree project in vocational higher education sectors, like ECEC programmes, should principally lie with representatives of traditionally non-vocational academic disciplines (cf. Gustafsson 2008). New and more creative ways of dealing with the final project need to be developed, which recognise professional values and knowledge, and are connected to social solidarity and ethics in public service occupations.

From this study, we also conclude that beliefs and practices on ‘what is at stake’ concerning the degree project are increasingly driven by measurements and controls within the decentralised and marketised higher education system, by which the

perceived ‘academic quality’ of the degree project at the local university is decisive for its accreditation (Kim 2002; Mattsson 2008; Haikola 2013; Swedish Higher Education Authority 2014).

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Notes

- 1 With different emphases over time, preschool is principally aimed at 1- to 6-year-olds, and the leisure centre at 7- to 12-year-olds in activities before and after the school day.
- 2 Other terms for the degree project include independent work, final project work, thesis work, special project and in-depth studies (Gustafsson 2008).
- 3 The *Local Degree Ordinance* specifies local requirements on the basis of the Higher Education Ordinance.
- 4 Three major models of the Bachelor thesis: i) conducted, assessed and ventilated at the department; ii) conducted within a research project, assessed and ventilated at the department; iii) conducted at a firm/institution outside the university, sometimes presented at a seminar; with ventilation only occasionally taking place (National Higher Agency for Education, 2007).
- 5 In this context, Educational Sciences represents the two disciplines of Pedagogik (Education) and Pedagogiskt Arbete (Educational Work).

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