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Extended Writing Demands – A Tool for ‘Academic Drift’ and the Professionalisation of Early Childhood Profession?

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the extended demands for writing in the Swedish public service sector of early childhood and how academic writing in the higher education programmes aimed at professional work in that sector is perceived to be of value for early childhood practice among practitioners. Empirical data was collected in individual interviews and focus groups among 69 early childhood staff in two different communities. The study points to an overall focus on assessments and evaluation in professional writing which tends to challenge everyday communication, i.e. everyday discourse for an internal audience (staff, parents and children). The study further indicates that professional writing holds implications for social relations and contributes to strengthened hierarchies among early childhood staff; younger generations more trained in academic writing tend to be ‘ranked’ higher than staff more experienced in practice. Whether the twin demands for ‘professional’ and ‘academic’ writing will contribute to a ‘professional’ early childhood staff community, as suggested in policy and teacher union rhetoric, remains an open question.

KEYWORDS
Academic writing; academisation; early childhood education and care; professional writing

Introduction

A common trend of many vocationally-oriented programmes in higher education is an ‘academic drift’, i.e. a move towards academic practices as expressed in curriculum, degree structure and research (Edwards & Miller 2008; Kyvik 2009). In Sweden, ‘academisation’ in the early 1990s of teacher education programmes (Erixon Arreman, 2005; Hegender 2010), including Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was paralleled by the inclusion of the public service of early childhood in the national education system; at the time a new emphasis in policy rhetoric described teachers in early childhood services as “professionals” (Nyberg 2008), including new responsibilities for written documentation in the workplace (Prämling & Sheridan 2004; Andersson 2013). In the early 2000s, a compulsory final degree project (“Examensarbete”) corresponding in time to a bachelor thesis in the ‘non-vocational’ disciplines, was introduced in the ECEC programmes (Governmental bill 1999/2000:135). Thereafter, the academic quality of students’ completed final degree project...
(FDP) have come to constitute the main basis for licensing the programmes at the respective higher education institution (Haikola 2013).

The emphasis on written communication in early childhood services entails new ways of writing, what we suggest here as a new 'professional literacy'. In this study, we explore ‘professional writing’ in relation to the emphasis on ‘academic writing’ in Swedish higher education programmes aimed at work in the early childhood services and with a specific focus on how practitioners in such services perceive ‘academic writing’ to be of value for pedagogical practice. Our empirical research draws on two sets of interview studies conducted between 2014 and 2016 directed to staff in early childhood, including individual interviews and focus groups (69 participants altogether). In the following, by “teacher” we refer to graduate early childhood staff, including preschool teachers and recreation centre pedagogues, who have gained formal academic and vocational qualifications for the early childhood sector.

Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden (1960s–2016)

Today, in the majority of European Union countries there is a need for high quality early childhood services (Urban 2009; Eurostat 2014). In Sweden, childcare services for 1- to 12-year-old children are provided as integrated parts of the public service system, and directed to all families irrespective of their income, social background and cultural orientation (Blomqvist 2004). Early childhood services were instigated by the state in the 1960s in response to women’s movements’ demands for institutionalised childcare (Rosengren 1982; Sainsbury 1996; Nyberg 2008). At the same time, the training of staff for the preschool and the recreation centre (‘before- and after-school activities’) was provided in colleges at post-secondary level; so-called pre-school seminars were established on a large scale across the country, financed by the state and free for students to attend (Johansson 1992). As an extension of women’s traditional role, the early childhood sector opened up the labour market for women (Andrae-Thelin & Elgqvist Saltzman 1989); still, over the last 10 years only about 4 percent of pre-school staff have been men (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 16).

Since the late 1990s, the childcare sector has been headed by the Ministry of Education; objectives of learning, social development and care are stipulated in the Education Act (2010) and further clarified in national curricula for the respective age group. Legal entitlement to the early childhood service for families includes preschool (for 1- to 5-year-olds), pre-school class (for 6-year-olds) and the recreation centre of ‘before- and after-school activities’ (for 7-to 12-year-olds) (Andersson 2013; Hägglund & Pramling Samuelsson 2009). By 2014, more than eight out of ten (83%) of 1- to 5-year-olds and more than nine out of ten (93%) of 4- to 5-year-olds were registered in preschool (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2016, p. 10). The overarching responsibilities for the provision of early childhood services lie with the respective 290 municipalities, whereas such services can be provided by ‘traditional’ establishments run within the municipality, as well as a variety of private actors including non-profit and for-profit providers (Blomqvist 2004). Since the onset of ‘new’ policies in the early 1990s with an emphasis on individual choice and a diversity of providers, the private early childhood sector has continuously expanded (Andersson, 2013; Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto 2009a, 2009b; The Swedish National Agency for Education 2016). All providers are funded by a voucher system, i.e. a specific sum for each child. Regarding staff qualifications, the
Education Act (2010) recommends graduate staff (preschool teachers, pre-school class teachers, recreation centre pedagogues). In practice, the proportion of graduate staff varies, with generally bigger proportions of non-graduate staff among the private providers (The Swedish National Agency of Education 2016). In the 2000s, a growing diversity of early childhood services was met by increased state control systems (Rönberg 2014; The Swedish National Schools Inspectorate 2015).

**ECEC – vocational programmes in higher education**

Currently, the ECEC programmes constitute one of the largest vocational higher education fields; by 2015, preschool teacher education was provided at 20 universities and university colleges and was by far the biggest programme in the teacher education sector (The Swedish Higher Education Authority 2016, p. 40). Over time, the ECEC programmes have almost exclusively recruited female students, among whom the majority is first-generation students (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Andersson 2013; Swedish Higher Education Authority 2016). Well into the early 2000s, the early childhood college programmes remained in a ‘hidden’ binary system outside an overarching academic community (lack of research structures, lack of research funding, lack of research trained staff) (also see Johansson 1992). Hence, at the onset of the FDP, few teacher educators in the ECEC programmes had acquired their own experiences of academic writing (Lind, 2001; The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2006).

The ECEC programmes are regulated at the national level by laws and statutes for the Swedish higher education sector, including national statutes for the respective programme; at the particular university establishment the regulations are detailed and transposed to local curricula (Gustafsson 2008; The Swedish Higher Education Authority 2016). Over time, the national statutes have prescribed a vocational approach for the final degree project¹, including that the FDP should reflect the student writers’ critical reflection abilities vis-à-vis research-based knowledge and own experiences (Authors 2015; 2017). In the 2000s, the FDP is almost exclusively conducted as a small thesis (Gustafsson 2008; Råde 2016).

**Aims and research question**

Against this backdrop, this study explores the more recent and extensive demands concerning writing for staff in the early childhood services, and to what extent writing in the ECEC programmes, specifically the final degree project, is considered to be of value for practitioners. To do so, we pose three research questions:

1. How do early childhood staff look upon the new and extended writing demands in the early childhood sector?
2. How is the final degree project understood in relation to professional practice in early childhood?
3. In which ways do the new writing demands in the early childhood sector affect professional practice?
Writing at university and in professional practice

The extent to which writing in ECEC programmes, and specifically the FDP might be directly or indirectly of value for professional practice is connected to ongoing debates about the nature of the relationship between ‘academic’ qualifications and their relevance to professional practice. The issue can be referred back to Aristotle’s concepts of knowledge; ‘episteme’ as the scientific understanding of a problem, that can be explained and investigated, whereas ‘phronesis’ as related to practical wisdom is ‘particularistic and situational’ (Korthagen 2001; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio & Kalliala 2015).

Writing at university

With a focus on Social Work, Rai and Lillis (2013) explored relations between writing within higher education and writing in professional practice; while social work graduates did not feel that they were prepared for engaging in professional writing, they valued the learning they had gained from the academic assignments. Likewise, Dillon (2011) discussed tensions in balancing academic and professional entry requirements for social work education in South Africa. Concerning writing in business education, Clinebell and Clinebell (2008) similarly point to tensions between academic rigour and real-world relevance. It has further been suggested that the perceived ‘artificial divide’ in writing for academic and professional purposes can be tackled by research-based writing courses (McMillen, Garcia and Bolin, 2010).

Briefly, in previous studies on the final degree project in the Swedish ECEC context we have identified a strong ‘semantic gravity’ (Maton 2009, also see Maton 2013), i.e. meaning closely related to acquisition and use in the professional context (Authors 2015; 2017). We have also identified an academic discourse convention, as signalled by the IMRaD structure, whereas the use of particular wordings and expressions signal a vocational habitus (see Colley et al. 2003), i.e. students’ identification with the inherent values of care and ethical responsibilities for the early childhood sectors which are stipulated in national curricula and the Education Act, and which tend to be transposed/carried by the practitioners. Moreover, the overall alignment of students’ written final degree projects with early childhood services’ inherent values was found to be in line with Northedge’s (2003) claim of academic writing being justification of a profession. In that sense, the ECEC students were performing a balancing act between a professional and academic discourse.

Writing in professional practice

The literacy practices in early childhood services have changed significantly over the last four decades; writing competence among staff is today central to the formulation of ideas and thoughts (Andersson 2013; Emilsson & Pramling Samuelsson 2014; Löfgren 2014; Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg & Vuorinen 2011; Ministry of Education 1997). The integration of early childhood services into the education sector in the 1990s, including specific early childhood curricula (Education Act 2010; see The Swedish National Agency for Education 2010), entailed strengthened demands concerning written documentation principally with a focus on implementing and evaluating the
then new reforms (Pramling & Sheridan 2004; Andersson 2013). Prior to this, writing in early childhood mainly concerned annual planning and evaluation for ‘internal’ use at a particular workplace (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto 2009a). More recently, systematic documentation (‘quality work’) is imposed to demonstrate to a wider public audience that the social and pedagogical activities and improvements of the establishment are in line with the goals for early childhood (Pramling and Sheridan 2004; Emilsson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014).

Research by Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto (2009a p. 262) further points to the different functions of ‘institutional narratives’ in childcare; whereas the description of the local goals and their implementation are aimed at a wider audience (parents, local and national education authorities, including the national Inspectorate), the ‘institutional narrative’ is also considered to reflect staff visions of the establishment, theoretically in line with the ‘fabrication’ of texts (Ball 2006) designed to serve many purposes in a market-like education sector. Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto further highlight an ‘inward’ governing function of professional writing: “in different ways, the publicly accessible documents govern preschool activities and the teaching profession” (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto 2009a, p. 262). Studies of quality accounts further indicate there is an emphasis on children’s learning parallel to the overall absence of narratives concerning the traditional ‘professional skills’ of care, including abilities to deal with social issues and sensitive human relations. The stress on learning is further related to the policy rhetoric describing early childhood teachers as ‘professionals’, thus implicitly in contrast to the less qualified occupation of child minders (Löfdahl and Pérez Prieto 2009a; Löfdahl and Folke Fichtelius 2015).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is underpinned by theoretical concepts from different academic fields. For the analyses of professional and academic hierarchies we use the concepts “professionalism and professionalisation” and associated terminologies drawing on sociological definitions (Larson 1979) and value-based definitions (Englund 1992; Englund & Solbrekke 2014). We also draw on the theoretical concept of ‘academic drift’ (Kyvik, 2007). For analysing literacy shifts in the ECEC context, we relate to theories on Media Ecology and social life on a stage (Strate 2008; Meyrowitz 1985; Goffman 1959). We further draw on Northedge’s typology of everyday, professional and academic discourse (Northedge 2003), including literacy as farming and mediating tools (Wertsch 1998; Latour 1996).

Professionalism and Professionalisation

As previously mentioned, the education reforms of the early 1990s included a new rhetoric on teachers, describing them as “professionals” (Carlgren & Klette 2008; Nyberg 2008). It should be noted that the two concepts of professionalism and professionalisation represent two different logics, i.e. professional responsibility and professional accountability, as clarified by Englund (1992). While professionalism is linked to the public good, moral rationale and trust, professionalisation is linked to control and external audit (Englund & Solbrekke 2014). Moreover, in sociological terms, a
profession is constituted by members of a group who share a theoretical knowledge base, define and control their own work and have a knowledge monopoly in the field (Larson 1979; Abbott 1988; Evetts 2009). Accordingly, since teachers (along with nurses and social workers) are employees within the public social service professions they do not control their field to the same extent as the classical professions (doctors and lawyers), which is why it is argued that they instead constitute a “semi-profession” (Larson 1979).

**Academic drift**

Kyvik (2007, 2009) identifies a common trend of ‘academic drift’, including different movements towards academic practices for many vocational programmes that were originally provided outside the university. For example, according to Kyvik ‘staff drift’ comes into existence among individual staff members who are more oriented to the national and international community of scholars than others; ‘programme drift’ is related to strategies of groups of staff members, and ‘institutional drift’ is driven by status competition. ‘Policy drift’, finally, again following Kyvik, implies the integration of previous non-university education into the higher education system by the state authorities.

**Media Ecology**

Media ecology is based on the idea that communication media are not neutral, transparent or value-free channels; various physical and symbolic forms promote different physical or perceptual and cultural effects that can be related to media’s inherent biases (Strate 2008; 2010; 2011; McLuhan 1964). In line with Goffman (1959), Meyrowitz (1985) sees social life using the metaphor of drama, whereby each of us plays various roles on different social stages, the ‘back stage’ and ‘front stage’ region, and each ‘audience’ is offered a somewhat different version of ourselves. What and how things can be said on the front stage is more formally represented – what can be said in the back-stage region is more informal and expressive. While Meyrowitz (1985) explores the potential effects of the shift from what he calls ‘print situations’ to ‘electronic situations’ on a broad range of social roles, we explore the effects of the shift from internal and informal print situations to external and formal print situations.

**Everyday, professional and academic discourse**

Northedge (2003) identifies three types of discourses that are employed in different contexts: everyday, professional and academic. Following Northedge, we find everyday written and oral discourse at the public level in the mass media and locally in the home and community. Everyday discourse functions ‘tribally’ and works by constructing group loyalties, presuming common perceptions, invoking folk wisdom and naming enemies, while less so through analytical reasoning and alternative viewpoints. A professional discourse places emphasis on ethics and social solidarity; it requires that the employees absorb, accept and obey, whereas any debate is expected to take place with the authorities. By comparison, discourse within care workplaces/associated with
care tends to function in a more constrained way for keeping institutions and systems going, whilst protecting against internal disruption and external threat. In academic discourse, nothing is to be taken for granted; participants address themselves within measured, reflective written exchanges and a speaker’s arguments are separated from social position, personal loyalties and immediate crises, but with an overarching aspiration for theory building and research.

**Literacy as framing and mediating tools**

Wertsch (1998, 31) points out that the development of skills requires material objects, or properties of cultural tools. Latour (1996) likewise identifies two key social roles of objects for human activities: to hold a certain *frame* steady so that interaction can take place, and to *mediate* and aggregate events – to *relocate* them – in a network of events. We can thus say that the interaction and activities among children and staff in early childhood are framed by a number of physical and immaterial objects and cultural properties (the curriculum, the building, the environment inside and outside, furniture, books, toys, painting tools etc.) and also other human actors (parents and politicians). Further, we can see that each institution is framed by other establishments in the early childhood market, as previously mentioned (cf. Blomqvist 2004; Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto 2009a).

**The study**

The data for this study was collected in interviews and focus groups, including 65 staff in early childhood services, located in two different municipalities in northern Sweden; an administrative city (Maple City) and an industrial town (Aspen town) respectively. In both communities the early childhood services are almost exclusively handled by the municipalities. The participants were from nine different early childhood establishments; given the municipalities provision of early childhood, all participants worked in publicly governed early childhood services. Data was collected in two phases conducted with an interval of about 2 years (April 2014 and March 2016). In Phase I, we conducted individual, semi-structured qualitative interviews with 15 graduate preschool teachers. In a follow-up study, Phase II, the preliminary findings of the individual interviews were presented by one of the researchers to an audience of 50 early childhood staff in the industrial town.

In line with Harding (1991), we methodologically distinguish between research reflected on respectively by: i) the researchers themselves (light reflectivity); and ii) the researcher and the participants (strong reflectivity). With strong reflectivity, participants who are experienced in the field reflect (‘gaze back’) on the researcher’s project, led by a researcher who tries to look at the conducted research from the participants’ positions and backgrounds (Magnusson 1998). Nine of the Phase II participants had also participated in Phase I; the methodology to bring back preliminary results to participants in a study, and allow them to contribute with further reflections, is recognised as “back-talk focus groups” (Frisina 2006). In an individual interview situation, the researcher has greater control over the interview; in group talks, interviewees are encouraged to discuss a common topic with others, led by the researcher.
(Gibbs 2012; Kitzinger 1995). By spreading the preliminary results to the participants of a study, and collecting their reflections in back-talk focus groups, the participants are given greater influence on the research process (Frisina 2006).

The analyses of individual interviews underwent three transformations (Wolcott 1994) whereby significant linguistic signs of importance to the face-to-face meeting were excluded. First, verbatim transcriptions of the interviews provided a body of text of 152 pages in a Word document, equivalent to about 80,000 words (530 words/page). Second, a ‘meaning’ categorisation was achieved by sorting and coding the body of text. Third, quotations indicating similar statements were grouped in categories, grounded on the study’s overall and specific aims and aimed to generate themes in relation to the interview guide.

**Phase I**

The individual interviewees (14 preschool teachers, 13 women, 1 man; 1 recreation centre pedagogue, a woman) worked in nine different early childhood establishments, about half in Maple City and Aspen Town, respectively (fictional place names). The interview questions focused on writing experiences in the ECEC programmes and in early childhood services. The interviews were conducted between April 2014 and September 2015, were about 40 minutes long, digitally recorded, and all were fully transcribed. The interviews were administered by both authors of this paper, one researcher at a time. Informants of various ages who were presumed to have conducted ECEC studies at different times were approached by the ‘snowball technique’ (Seidman 2012), i.e. one informant leading to another; initial contacts were made by e-mail and telephone calls. The data collection followed the ethics guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2011), including informed consent, professional secrecy, anonymity and confidentiality.

Details on the informants (fictional name and graduation year, work experience and complementary higher education studies, if any, and leadership responsibilities) are presented in Table 1 below:

As shown in Table 1, the period in which the interviewees’ graduated covered more than four decades (1975–2008), thus including graduation within the former seminar tradition and university-based education. Table 1 also shows substantial work experience in the early childhood sector, ranging from almost four decades to four years, with an average of 22 years among the participants. Table 1 also shows leadership positions for three informants and a broader academic competence, including a Bachelor degree for four informants, among whom two were holding a leadership position.

**Phase II**

In the second phase, in line with Harding (1991) a follow-up study (so-called strong reflexive study) was led by one of the researchers and directed to 50 preschool staff in a school district in the industrial Aspen town. Phase two was enabled to take place through collaboration between the researchers and education leadership in this community. The study was conducted on a ‘staff day’ involving all staff in two preschool establishments, including 34 graduate preschool teachers (one of whom had a complementary degree as a special needs teacher) and 16 child minders (see Table 2). After
about a 30-minute oral presentation supported by PowerPoint on the preliminary findings of Phase I, the participants were asked to reflect on these with their professional ‘gaze’. To encourage discussions, the participants were asked to join in ‘back-talk focus groups’ of between three to five staff in the same position and from the two workplaces (Frisina 2006; also see Kitzinger 1995). Given their different educational backgrounds, the idea was that they should be able to speak more freely among colleagues in the same position, not the least due to identified hierarchies between the groups. They were asked to be sincere and not hesitate to say if the presented results deviated from their own experiences, then summarise in writing and submit the group discussions to the researcher, including short notes for the group members on staff category, education background, year of graduation, including higher education degree, if any. Research ethics were clarified to the participants and followed in the study; they were informed that their written documents would stay with the researchers, including that they were not asked to provide their names. Their discussions handed in constituted 24 handwritten pages. Quotations from this material, for example (8:14), refer to group 8 and page 14.

As shown in Table 2, slightly more than two-thirds of the participants were graduate preschool teachers, including one teacher in special needs, and about one-third were child minders, of upper secondary education background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Graduate early childhood teachers</td>
<td>Preschool teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Child minders</td>
<td>Including for a majority (13 of 16) one year specialisation on early childhood conducted in courses provided at the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Special needs teacher</td>
<td>Graduate early childhood teacher plus further higher education studies (1.5 years) in special needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Total number of informants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. 15 interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of graduation</th>
<th>Qualification and graduation year</th>
<th>Workplace experience in early childhood</th>
<th>Complementary academic studies</th>
<th>Position in workplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Stina, preschool teacher, 1975</td>
<td>39 years</td>
<td>Courses in History, Drama and Music</td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin, preschool teacher, 1979</td>
<td>35 years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Director/manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sylvia, preschool teacher, 1979</td>
<td>39 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Eva, preschool teacher, 1980</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evelyn, preschool teacher, 1983</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ebba, preschool teacher, 1983</td>
<td>31 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mia, preschool teacher 1984</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Director/manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Nina, preschool teacher, 1991</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nelly, preschool teacher, 1991</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nora, recreation centre pedagogue,</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recreation centre pedagogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Director/manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Madeleine, preschool teacher, 1997</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree; onset of PhD studies</td>
<td>Director/manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>Nanna, preschool teacher, 1998</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tora, preschool teacher, 2003</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tove, preschool teacher, 2008</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tina, preschool teacher, 2006</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Participants in Phase II.
Writing in the ECEC programmes

The individual interviews (Phase I) give an overall picture of the changing demands for writing in the ECEC programmes from the 1970s onwards; from early on with a main focus on psychologically-oriented observations and planning, as previously documented (Gustafsson 2008; Löfdahl Pérez Prieto 2009a). For example, interviewees recalled “written envisions” of organised situations with children and their outcomes (Sylvia 1979), “observations of individual children” (Stina 1975), further summaries on the course literature in psychology, and “how the ‘old men’– specific references to Piaget – viewed the meeting with the children” (Sylvia 1979). Students also recalled individual papers based on literature such as “a small piece of work on music in preschool” (Sylvia 1979) and “on children’s motoric skills” (Nina 1991). According to the interviewees, individual written papers were not mandatory; there was “very little writing” (Eva 1980) but greater emphasis on “group work” (Eva 1980; Evelyn 1983) and “theme work” (Mia 1984).

The one male former student, Martin (1979), currently in a leadership position, claimed that he did not remember writing at all:

I did not have to be literate to be able to take my degree in the late 70s; when we were discussing what we would do and what we wanted to do, I wonder if I wrote anything at all? (Martin 1979)

Martin’s experience of ‘non-writing’ seems to fit in well with the above context.

By the mid-1990s, the demands for writing were sharpened by a national higher education reform (Gustafsson 2008); the onset of a mandatory FDP (although not specified in the time of studies) was reflected on by the interviewees; for example, Nanna (1998) talked about her FDP as very “structured” and Nora (1997) conducted an investigation and interviewed children “about how milk got from the cow to the glass”, including “background and those elements that should be included in a thesis”. Madeleine (1997) who named her text a “B-essay”, and also “a story”, claimed that the amount of words was the most important.2 Tora (2003) similarly referred to her writing on the impact of massage on a group of children as a “B-essay”. The point here is that the interviewees tended to compare their written assignments in the ECEC programmes with the traditional academic structures of the ‘non-vocational’ disciplines.

The onset in the early 2000s of the FDP (10 weeks’ full-time studies), hence comparable in time to a Bachelor thesis (or C-essay) was further reflected on by the interviewees who graduated within the then new structures (Governmental bill 1999/2000:135). For example, the concept of “C-essay” was used by Tove (2008) concerning her FDP on sustainable development which was based on both interviews and questionnaires.

In brief, the interviews (Phase I) indicate that writing in the ECEC programmes prior to the new millennium was limited in time and scope, sometimes not compulsory, and had little emphasis on ‘academic’ rigour. Written assignments often concerned a review of the literature, the planning of activities including observations on individual children. As it appears, specific text requirements were scarce. Practice was made visible by observations or by transforming academic discourse in books and articles, for encouraging the development of and reflection on content knowledge (Hoffman 2011). The national introduction of a ‘pilot’ FDP in the 1990s entailed an increased emphasis on writing and knowledge production, i.e. an emerging ‘academic discourse’, in line with
Northedge (2003). But the texts of the student writers were still principally intended for their own learning, i.e. ‘Writing for Learning (WFL) (Hoffman, 2011), which we further identify as a backstage bias (Goffman 1959) and in an everyday discourse (Northedge, 2003). The participants in Phase II largely agreed with the findings on a greater emphasis on writing in the ECEC programmes.

**Writing demands in ECEC services**

Overall, a positive stance on language and writing in general was expressed by the ECEC teachers and informants in Phase I. It was further agreed that writing in the early childhood context had increased in quantity as well as in difficulty, and that it addressed various receivers, including parents, local leadership, politicians at the municipal level and for further collection by the national education authorities. A majority suggested the strengthened demands on literacy were “good for the profession”; for instance, it was claimed that “the profession includes caring and nursing, but there is much more” (Nora 1997). The long list of written tasks which were mentioned included: transformation of national policies to local plans and principles; local policies including plans for handling gender equality (“jämställdhetsplan”), likewise ‘equal treatment’ (“likabehandlingsplan”); short-term and long-term planning of activities; pedagogical documentation and observation notes on the social and learning development of each child; a weekly or monthly newsletter to parents, and continuous reflections, to be kept as a diary, on one’s own work. Further, mandatory written reports mentioned included “activity reports”, “time reports” and “systematic quality reports” (cf. Sheridan, Williams and Sandberg 2013). Moreover, the new “Project application” format concerned applications to state authorities and the municipality for financing a new specific project. It was also mentioned that the differing control checkpoints of each local workplace should be “evidence-based” by explicit reference to national “steering documents”, i.e. the national curriculum for preschool, the pre-school class or the recreation centre.

Some of the more experienced ECEC teachers emphasised that they themselves avoided writing for an external audience and gladly handled over any writing tasks to younger staff generations who were presumed to be better trained in writing (Sylvia 1979; Ebba 1983; Eva 1980; Nelly 1991). It was also argued that the main aim of “prioritising the children” had become subordinated to writing, and that the time and energy used for writing conflicted with daily routines and “duties” (Eva 1980; Nelly 1991). The policy idea of quality assurance as a means for improving the quality of early childhood services was explicitly questioned by more experienced teachers, as in the following:

> Quality reports, I wonder who reads them, and I’m very sceptical. They are just lying somewhere, I think. We wished that they were for us in order to move on, but unfortunately there is a lot of writing just to make it look good (Stina 1979).

Some teachers suggested that the now formalised “systematic quality work” was given too much emphasis; “systematic quality work has become the main thing” (Eva 1980); it was also considered as “a heavy task” (Nelly 1991):

> Everything you write should be based on evidence, and you should purposefully work towards the goal (4)
Somewhat different perspectives seemed to be held by teachers from younger generations. For example, it was suggested that documentation in different forms was important for systematic quality work; “writing made invisible things they were doing visible” (Nora 1997). It was also suggested that writing “ensured the quality” of early childhood services (Tove 2008). It was further claimed that written assessments of practices relative to the curriculum (Nora 1997) functioned as drivers for development; “based on this and our potential right now, and where we are, we do an analysis of the situation concerning what we need to develop and how” (Evelyn 1983). Interestingly, it was also suggested that writing mainly concerned “profiling” of the workplace, targeting parents and the prospective recruitment of new children (Tora 2003):

We must be able to show where we stand and be able to recruit children (7).

The three interviewees holding a leadership position largely supported the policy demands regarding ‘professional’ writing, albeit with different emphases and attitudes. Martin (1979) suggested that ECEC teachers easily and too often ended up in “descriptive texts”, and called for more analysis and systematic studies by the teachers themselves. Mia (1984) similarly suggested that teachers were too uncritical and accepting. Madeleine (1997) emphasised an overall need to stick to the given templates.

Participants in Phase II highlighted two dimensions of writing in early childhood services; the first concerned adhering to given specific templates, the second concerned that “everything must connect to the curriculum and a scientific basis” (6:10). Varying competencies in language and writing among staff were problematised; whereas some saw reflective writing as a way to develop individual knowledge and competencies (8:14), others expressed a fear of not writing “right” (12:19), including not being able to “analyse and write reflections on your own practice” (3: 4). It was also suggested that the strictly reduced time for writing tended to create considerable stress (9:15-16; 13:22). The writing tasks were further seen as an overall hindrance to spontaneous activities, with a negative impact on children’s learning by playing (13:22). In addition, hesitation concerning whether writing demands had actually increased was heard from some child minders who argued that their work was performed entirely within an oral culture. As we see it, the differing perspectives here reflect the formal division between graduate and non-graduate staff who are further likely to have different responsibilities for writing and documentation in the workplace.

To summarise, the informants, including the participants in Phase I and Phase II, saw the new writing literacies in the early childhood workplace as being imposed from above, emerging from national and local policies. The idea of written documentation was generally approved of, but also recognised as an extra burden. The inherent contradiction between the continuously strengthened requirements for writing, and early childhood’s main objectives of caring, learning and socialisation was also pointed out. The more experienced informants (graduating before the 2000s) tended to find that their education and training did not fit in with the new writing demands. A varying perception shared among the younger generations was that written documentation was good for the ECEC teachers as a group and would help raise their status as a ‘profession’. A similar perspective, including high expectations of writing, was heard from the interviewees in a leadership position.
Connected to ‘academic drift’ (Kyvik 2007), the study indicates an emerging, individual ‘staff drift’; we can also identify signs of ‘institutional drift’ in younger groups of staff, also in line with Kyvik’s definition of academic drift as driven by the status competition of a particular group. Also in line with Kyvik we can see that leadership attitudes on a rhetorical level represent a ‘policy drift’.

Suggested impact of the FDP

In the individual interviews (Phase I) it was emphasised that the current academic demands of the FDP should be connected to the practical realities, so that it might “be used” and contribute to the development of professional practice, while it should not be conducted “for the sake of writing”. Among the younger generations, it tended to be considered as “a theoretical basis for the profession” (Nanna 1998); that it might provide opportunities for ECEC teachers “to assimilate research, take a pause and reflect” (Tina 2009), that it “involved understanding of the activities in preschool” (Nina 1991) and could provide a “scientific foundation for the activities in preschool” (Tove 2008).

When you start to work, you easily lose the theoretical basis of the profession but your own ‘self-theory’ and opinion, not based in science, will not help to raise the profession (Nanna 1998).

Although it was suggested that the FDP was more a format to apply when writing systematic quality reports in line with the new directives from politicians and administrators, the academic proficiency gained by the FDP was seen as ensuring readiness for a new task (Tora 2003), including competence to identify urgent issues and to share them with others (Sylvia 1979). It was further suggested that the FDP could contribute to the general development of writing as it was similar to the type of written reflections, observations, documentations and analyses which are required in early childhood practice (Nina 1991). In that sense, the FDP represented ‘quality assurance’ (Nora 1997).

Among the more experienced teachers, the FDP was less embraced; on the contrary, it was claimed there is no direct link between a written FDP and professional development (Eva 1980; Ebba 1983; Evelyn 1983; Nelly 1991; Stina 1975). Yet, it was suggested that the FDP could be politically useful by providing “academic pressure” directed to politicians and managers concerning the situation of an ‘overload of children’ in early childhood establishments (Stina 1975).

Also in this respect, the three managers shared high expectations regarding the FDP for being conducted in connection to practice, for having an academic impact on the profession, and for being useful in practice. Martin (1979) additionally wanted the FDP to be “provocative” and contribute to “new points of view” to bring about new knowledge and critical thinking, and he believed the FDP could contribute to inquire into prevailing notions, as he put it. However, he had the feeling there was a widespread suspicion among early childhood teachers towards students wishing to collect data for their FDP. Likewise, Mia (1983) suggested the academic requirements of an FDP were important in relation to preschool’s emphasis on education. Mia (1984) added that the FDP was perceived to contribute to more experienced writers, in line with the new requirements for evaluation and
assessment. Similarly, Madeleine (1997) suggested that a “theoretically oriented FDP” was relevant for preschool. All in all, concerning the impact of the FDP the study indicates that, among the individual professionals (Phase I), it was perceived as positive for the professional status, in the main considered as a type of writing that should be adopted by early childhood staff as part of ‘systematic quality work’. It was further considered to enhance the development of critical thinking and writing skills, i.e. an emerging academic discourse (Northedge 2003) which would help raise the academic level of the profession, i.e. support ‘academic drift’ (Kyvik 2007). These claims were articulated with academic concepts and words such as “reflect” and “distance from practice”, also including “research”, “scientific”, “academic”, “theoretical” etc. (Northedge 2003). While some teachers visualised academic development in line with ‘staff drift’, the leadership expressed ideas on academic development corresponding to ‘policy drift’.

Yet an overall more critical attitude to the FDP, as holding little value for professional practice, seemed to be shared among the majority of informants in Phase II:

The FDP does not always belong to practice in early childhood. It should rather focus on something concrete that provides the teachers with tools they can use. The idea of an FDP is good but it should be anchored in reality. Early childhood must be developed – but is the FDP the right path? (1: 1)

**Stress and hierarchies**

The study further indicated increased stress related to the demands on writing. Particularly among more experienced staff, writing was expressed as “tough”, a “trend” to keep up with and also explicitly mentioned as a “stress factor”. Therefore, Eva (1980) was grateful that such stress could be reduced by new colleagues who were good writers; then they can write and we talk, she said, “since I prioritise the children”. It was also mentioned that the demand to comply with both the curriculum and research created a less independent teacher: “previously, we used to plan and do our activities with the children and afterwards check with the curriculum; now it is the other way round” (Eva 1980). Evelyn (1983) gave a similar example, “this is the case now unlike previous practices”, namely, that extracts of curriculum text were copied and placed next to a child’s work.

Holding a leadership position, Mia (1983) claimed the writing requirements had led to growing tensions between the different professional groups, but she also recognised that the growing writing workload was accompanied by heavier responsibilities for those doing the writing (10). Tora (2003) explicitly meant that her ability to write led to influence and advantages, involving a bigger impact on the work, as well as greater self-confidence, “experienced teachers are no longer the best”, she said. If you are a fast writer, you can also get more time with the kids. However, Tove (2008) did not think that being good at writing implied becoming more respected as an early childhood teacher, but instead it raised the status of early childhood teachers as a group, she said; “the best pedagogues are still those who have the highest number of children around them”. Another view was that while childhood teachers were previously stuck to the ‘doing’, the new writing demands entailed a collective ongoing conversational process involving all staff (Tina, 2006).
The Phase II participants similarly identified divisions due to writing demands between the different groups of professionals; on one hand, concerning a “gap between those educated in the 90s who got computer skills from their mother’s milk, and older teachers” and, on the other hand, changed the position of ‘care’ within early childhood services.

Summary and Discussion

To summarise, in this study we have explored the stronger emphasis on writing in the early childhood sector; we have pointed to a shift from a ‘back-stage’ informal, everyday oral or written situation to a more formal and professional situation, what we call here a ‘script situation’ and which indicates ‘academic drift’ in policy and among staff (Kyvik 2007, 2009). The study indicates a growing imbalance in the time consumed for writing and the idea of work in early childhood, in terms of being physically around and communicating by way of talk and activities with the directly implicated receivers of early childhood services – the children; hence, for many study participants writing was seen as a distraction from ‘work’.

Concerning the first research question (1) regarding how today’s early childhood staff look upon the more demanding literacy for an external audience, i.e. managers, politicians, new parents and the invisible market etc., the interviewees stressed that writing ‘en masse’ of ‘systematic quality work’ had increased in both quantity and difficulty, including assessments, evaluations, and individual reflections. However, the majority embraced the new writing demands and suggested that such writing would ‘lift’ the profession. Leadership took a more superior and demanding perspective, suggesting that early childhood staff should be more critical, and that staff writing easily tended to end up in descriptions rather than analysis.

Concerning the second research question (2), i.e. how do early childhood staff regard the compulsory final degree project and to what extent do they think it might assist their professional work, we found the FDP tended to be perceived as a piece of work that should be useful and able to be put into practice. As it appeared, the FDP was overall perceived as principally equivalent to the policy demands of systematic quality assurance. Leadership saw a need for more critical thinking, which was suggested to challenge the unreflected traditions and notions in early childhood services.

Among the Phase II participants, we found a more critical attitude to both writing demands in the workplace and how the FDP might support practice. We suggest that this is likely to be related on one hand to differing qualifications, i.e. about two-thirds were graduate teachers and about one-third were child minders. The more critical attitude can also be related to the in-depth discussions in the groups where insights and understandings on a topic can be problematised among participants in contrast to individual interviewees who might avoid disclosing more critical views on a topic (Gibbs, 2012).

Concerning the third research question (3), i.e. in which ways do the new writing demands in the early childhood sector affect professional practice, we found that the new demands have been prone to cause more work and stress, but they also imply higher regard for staff “writers”. Younger generations who completed their FDP in the more academic programme structures in the 2000s tended to adopt a new, both academic and vocational attitude. More experienced teachers who graduated from
less academic structures, including child minders, tended to hold on to a vocational attitude, further declared as entailing less confidence in their own writing. Thus, the new writing demands have tended to create divisions and hierarchies among core practitioners, embodied in sharpened tensions also between education and care. Further, the new requirements have implied a different framing of the activities, concretely reducing physical and intellectual communication between staff and children at the expense of writing; early childhood is not only about ‘doing’ (practice) things, but is in line with policy and based on evidence (theory).

**Concluding viewpoints**

Regarding the consequences of the writing demands relative to professional work in the early childhood services, we suggest that the emphasis on written documentation is likely to contribute to a changed framing (Latour 1996; Wertsch 1998) of early childhood activities concerning both social relations and work content.

An overall conclusion we draw from this study is that professional writing in the early childhood context tends to generate emerging hierarchies between teachers who write and those who do not. The study indicates that teachers who do professional documentation, i.e. have more or less access to, and are more or less familiar with “new information systems” (Meyrowitz 1985) tend to receive a higher status among colleagues, including the development of their self-image as ‘writers’. Such divisions might hold further implications for career development, including salaries, and indicate new divisions between graduate and non-graduate early childhood staff.

In terms of mediation (Latour 1996), the new requirements on writing, which should be related to both research and the curriculum, indicate a shift from an informal, everyday oral or written situation to a more formal and professional script situation. This includes a shift from backstage bias to front stage bias (Goffman 1959), with a further impact on what is appropriate and conceivable to communicate both internally and externally (Strate 2010; 2011; Meyrowitz 1985). As identified in other studies (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto 2009a), this study also indicates that caring aspects might be difficult to put into words and thus be elusive in documentation aimed at external audiences. Likewise, professional abilities to deal with social problems and other sensitive issues might be banished from the quality accounts, and thus be considered as ‘second-class skills’, implying a stagnation of teachers’ professional development. We heard echoes of this in our study: “There is a lot of writing just to make it look good”, or “profiling” for the sake of recruiting children. In this sense, the written documentation, as carefully selected information, can to some extent be regarded as ‘fabrication’ (Ball 2006). However, according to Northedge (2003) professional discourse requires that the employees absorb, accept and obey, whereas any debate is expected to take place with the authorities. Critical thinking is only possible within the imposed limits of the professional discourse.

Whereas writing in the ECEC programmes today, specifically the FDP, is conducted according to academic guidelines and within academic genres, this study highlights that writing in ‘professional’ purposes is chiefly related to the idea of early childhood as a service. Professional writing in the early childhood context is largely about ‘profiling’ outwards, targeting parents and new potential parents, and in relation to other
preschools, national and local decision-makers, and for inspection (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009a; Löfdahl & Folke Fichtelius, 2015; Rönnberg 2014).

In addition, this study explores the growing emphasis on writing as a facet of an ‘academic drift’ of the Swedish early childhood profession. For some early childhood staff, the writing of an FDP was considered as principally equivalent to systematic quality assurance, underpinned by leadership perceptions, parallel to the view of FDPs holding relevance for professional practice.

Following Northedge (2003), 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 normative curriculum of ‘care’, connected to social solidarity and ethics in public service jobs (Dahlberg et al. 1999; Andersson 2013) and might therefore perceive such an academic discourse as incompatible with their personal and professional loyalties. This contradictory situation was clearly depicted by those interviewees who claimed that their writing should be supported by both the curriculum and research; whereas curriculum represents policy – which governs the early childhood professional discourse, research constitutes an academic critical discourse (Northedge, 2003). While we can see no ‘institutional academic drift’ in early childhood as a whole, teachers who embraced the new writing requirements and tended to express a more ‘academic’ attitude can be seen to represent ‘academic staff drift’ (Kyvik, 2007). Rather, we suggest that the new writing demands in early childhood, as played out in the ‘academisation’ of ECEC, can underpin developments that are referred to as professionalisation (Solbrekke and Englund 2014), related to assessments and audit systems (Rönnberg 2014).

In our discussion, we refer to the two concepts of professionalism and professionalisation that separately and respectively represent two different logics, i.e. professional responsibility and professional accountability. Professionalism is linked to the public good, moral rationale and trust, while professionalisation is linked to control and external audit (Solbrekke and Englund 2014). The ability to write is emerging as one of the more sensitive issues in the early childhood setting. One explanation is, of course, that writing is a fundamental skill for a professional identity; the idea of professionalism includes the production and control of a ‘professional’ knowledge base (Larson 1979). Further, policy terms referring to professional status have long been underpinned in policy rhetoric, and also adopted by the major teacher union (Carlgren & Klette 2008; Nyberg, 2008; Ringarp 2012). Yet, whether the current focus on writing in early childhood in line with ‘professional accountability’ will mean a ‘drift’ away from the early childhood teacher as a value-laden professional, grounded in teaching competence, moral dimensions and care, and will include a ‘drift’ away from ‘academic discourse’ remains to be to be seen. As echoed by one early childhood teacher’s concerns in Phase II:

What about the future?.../Not everything was bad before. Could there be valuable components that we will lose? (10:17)
Notes

1. Slightly varied formulations of national statutes in the 2000s as related to national reforms, including Sweden’s alignment to the Bologna Accord in 2007 (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2015), and a national teacher education reform in 2011 (Gov. bill 2009/10:89).

2. The ‘old’ concepts of B-essays and C-essays are related to the traditional ‘academic’ disciplines: a so-called “B-essay” was to be conducted at the end of 12 months’ full-time studies in a particular discipline; the “C-essay” (Bachelor thesis) was conducted at the end of 18 months’ full-time studies.

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