



# Professional and academic discourse – Swedish student teachers' final degree project in Early Childhood Education and Care



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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the scope and orientation of students' final degree projects in the Swedish field of Early Childhood Education and Care in relation to discourses on academic writing and national higher education policies, including the national curriculum and guidelines for professional work in the early childhood sector. Titles and abstracts of 75 final degree projects were analysed with a focus on their scope, aims and research questions. The conceptual framework encompasses theories and concepts on academic literacies, knowledge structures and the linguistic tools of rhetorical 'moves'. This study shows that the typical final degree project was based on empirical data and situated in a professional context, with the aim to explore and understand professional issues in relation to national policies and practical professional experience. We conclude that the final degree project's orientation in the field is deeply nourished by professional discourse, underpinned by national policies on early childhood education.

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## 1. Introduction

In Sweden today, the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is struggling to meet the twin demands of the graduate labour market and 'academisation' with a particular focus on academic writing (Erixon Arreman & Erixon, 2015; cf. Ivanič, 2004). Like many European countries where vocational fields were included in the higher education system in the 1960s and 1970s (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Scott, 1996), the field of ECEC has been transferred from post-secondary establishments to higher education to meet the increasing social demands for a more skilled workforce with a university-level education. Following Becher (1994), we can say that ECEC belongs to the 'soft and applied sciences' that are about functional training for professions. A major issue in the field concerns how to translate the theoretical subject-based knowledge of university-based studies to everyday practice, parallel to the development of abstract and academic knowledge including skills in writing. The field of ECEC is a relatively new and weak 'tribal' member of the academy with no distinct academic voice of its university staff and students (cf. Becher, 1994). Therefore, the students' writing in ECEC is deeply enmeshed in wider power relations

and struggles, including politicians, higher education authorities, academic institutions, and researchers (cf. Gustafsson, 2008; Råde, 2014). Despite a positive expansion in the numbers and qualities of students' final degree project (FDP) also referred to as an 'independent project' (SFS, 1993a, 1993b:100), as related to an overall growth of academic and pedagogical developments in the 2000s, increased measurements and accountability systems have been imposed 'from above' (national level) more or less modelled on traditions of established 'pure' disciplines (Englund, 2012). More recently, (between 2011 and 2015), all over the Swedish higher education sector, students' FDPs in all disciplines came to constitute the major grounds for licensing a respective higher education institution (Haikola, 2013).

Against this backdrop, our focus in this article on ECEC students' writing is based on a both quantitatively and qualitatively oriented analysis of successfully finalised FDPs. The theoretical territory of concern to our study is the field of 'academic literacies'. In line with our "transformative" rather than "normative" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 12) approach, we aim to uncover characteristic features, and explore alternative ways of meaning making in academia, rather than pointing to linguistic flaws and shortcomings (cf. Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000), including the thematic foci of all FDPs ( $N = 75$ ). The projects analysed were successfully completed between 2011 and 2014 at one of Sweden's major university providers of Early Childhood Education and Care programmes.

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The focus of this article centres on two research questions:

1. What are the content areas covered in the abstracts?
2. What are the rhetorical structures of the abstracts?

## 2. Early Childhood Education and Care – the Swedish context

Like many other professional fields elsewhere, the field of Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden is struggling to gain academic ‘respectability’; over the last 25 years, ECEC has been characterised by increased academic criteria combined with professional training. The practical relevance of the field is indisputable – in Sweden legal entitlement to childcare principally applies to a child from the early age of 12 months. ECEC as an applied field of academic and professional knowledge constitutes what Baynham (2000) calls a “practice-based discipline” (p. 20), which draws on a range of disciplines; a successfully completed undergraduate programme, including internship, provides the participant with a Professional degree. The ECEC field traditionally includes two closely related programmes for professional work in the public and social service sector of early childhood, including preschools (aimed at 1 to 6-year-olds), and recreation centres (‘Fritidshem’), i.e. an institutionalised ‘before-after-school home’ within the school sector (aimed at 7 to 12-year-olds) (Andersson, 2013; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; National Agency for Education, 2010). The ECEC programmes were instigated by the state in the 1960s, along with institutionalised childcare campaigned for by the women’s movement (Nyberg, 2008; Sainsbury, 1996); by the late 1970s ECEC programmes were formally included in university structures (Johansson, 1992) along with other traditionally non-academic teacher education programmes (primary teacher education, fine arts, home and consumer studies, physical education, textile, wood and metal work) and other post-secondary professional programmes (for example dentistry, journalism, nursing, social work) (Scott, 1996). At present, ECEC programmes are provided at around 25 university institutions in Sweden. In terms of student numbers, the field of ECEC (along with nursing) constitutes one of the largest vocational programmes; similar to recruitment patterns in other countries (Drudy, 2008a, 2008b; Witz, 2013), the students recruited are mainly first-generation female students (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Statistics Sweden, 2014). Within the prevalent higher education system in Sweden, along principles of management by objectives including decentralisation (Kim, 2015), national objectives for the ECEC programmes are decided on by parliament and provided in the Higher Education Ordinance; the national objectives are then transposed and concretised to local objectives at the respective institution (Gustafsson, 2008). Therefore, the provision of ECEC programmes might differ between different higher education establishments.

Within the EU 2020 strategy for smart and sustainable growth, the provision of quality in early childhood education is emphasised as being central for parents’, particularly women’s, participation in the labour market and for mitigating socio-economic inequalities (European Commission, n.d.). In Sweden, in connection to state reforms in the late 1990s for access to childcare for all, the responsibilities for ECEC services were transferred from the social sector to the education domain (Andersson, 2013; Neuman, 2010; Roth, 2001). The contents and orientation of ECEC programmes should be seen in the light of the interrelated policies for education, the labour market and social reforms (Ministry of Education and Science 2000). An emphasis on ‘schoolification’ of the ECEC sector in Sweden and elsewhere (OECD, 2006; Gov. Bill 1997/1998:93) includes expectations of young children’s learning (pre-) literacy,

(pre-) numeracy and (pre-) scientific skills (Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandembroeck, 2012).

While the ECEC programmes were formally integrated in the university sector (late 1970s), they remained an academic ‘cul-de-sac’; conducted in a traditional ‘seminar tradition’ with no direct connection to research structures, the majority of staff was also recruited on the basis of professional experience (Lind, 2001). Within a national teacher education reform in the early 2000s (Gov.Bill 1999/2000:135), growing proportions of teacher education staff were enabled to acquire a PhD degree (Erixon Arreman & Weiner, 2007; Reimers, 2014; Vinterek & Arnqvist, 2014), and the two ECEC programmes largely merged and were prolonged (from 36 to 42 months of full-time studies) thus equalised in time of studies with primary teacher education for, it was suggested, enhanced flexibility and employability of the teacher workforce (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 16). At the same time, the ECEC programmes have been increasingly measured and questioned in national assessments by scrutiny of policy documents, staff qualifications and student ‘outcomes’ (Carlgren, Lilja, Johansson, & Marton, 2009; Haikola, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2008). In assessments of the then first FDPs within ECEC and other traditionally ‘non-academic’ teacher education programmes in the early 2000s, the FDPs in these areas were compared to student theses in more established disciplines; the assessors pointed out a range of academic weaknesses and ‘lacks’ of the novice FDPs, specified as a lack of critical reflection, and a lack of a critical approach to the literature (National Agency for Higher Education, 2006a, 2006b). These assessments have though been criticised for their deficient validity and reliability (Gustafsson, 2008). More recently, the ‘academic’ quality of teacher education students’ written FDPs has become a focus of research (Råde, 2014). Similar concerns as in Sweden on how to introduce first-generation students as readers and writers of academic discourse in vocational higher education programmes are recognised in other countries (Chanock, 2000; Davenport, Dearling, & Lintern, 1998; French, 2013; Lea & Street, 1998).

## 3. The final degree project (1990s–2014)

It seems that in the 2000s there was a tacit agreement within the university that the FDP in the field of ECEC should be conducted on the model of a small doctoral thesis and broadly correspond to a bachelor thesis conducted in disciplines which are academically research oriented (but which lack a professional grounding) (Gustafsson, 2008). Also of note is that, previously, between the early 1990s and 2000s, the scope of time for the FDP varied from five to ten weeks of full-time studies (7.5 or 15 ECTS credits) across teacher education thus differing in both the time and scope from the traditional ‘non-vocational’ Bachelor (15 ECTS) and Master (30 ECTS) theses which were conducted over ten or twenty weeks of full-time studies. Within the national teacher education reform in the early 2000s (valid until 2011), the scope of the FDP was expanded and prolonged in time to ten weeks of full-time studies; new twin aims included preparing for development work within the profession and providing a basic qualification for postgraduate studies (Ministry of Education, 1999, 16).

## 4. Academic writing in vocational higher education

As the prime product of the university, writing is materialised in different kinds of texts in various disciplinary fields (Becher, 1994; Ivanič, 1998, 2004; cf. Lea & Street, 1998; Sullivan, 1996). Becher (1994) sees the academy as composed of different (disciplinary) tribes, with varying positions in a hierarchical system, each with its own name and territory. Thus, in the process of learning to write in university education students meet “conceptual

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