

Images of writing and the writing child

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Abstract: This article uses a discursive lens to illuminate how writing and the writing child is constructed in different texts since the nineteenth century. The concept 'image' is used as an analytical tool to gain perspective on dominant ideas about children as writers and their educational writing practices. These images are produced in educational practices, theories of writing, societal conceptions and didactic models, which together are referred to as a formation. The article ends by reflecting upon what consequences may be seen if taking a critical child perspective. The article provides an analysis against which writing teachers, teacher educators and researchers can gain a perspective on dominant ideas about young writers and their educational writing practices.

Keywords: Early childhood writing education, Critical child perspective, Review.

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Peer-reviewed article: Sent to reviewers January 2011, Accepted June 2011, Published August 2011

YOUNG CHILDREN'S WRITING EVENTS

Writing is discerned as a major issue in the national curriculum of Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009a), as well as a key competence in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (European Commission, 2006). It is also associated in current debates to a successful life and a well-functioning society (OECD, 2005; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009a). But writing appears to have escaped from being problematized in relation to what constitutes writing in young children's educational writing practices; practices which have embedded thoughts and ideas about writing as well as about young children as writers. Viewed from a critical child perspective (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001), this article aims to problematize and discuss consequences of and between different images of writing and the writing child.

Writing is often described as unequivocal and neutral - as a thing, or a skill, which is accessible for all children in the same way, something that is unproblematized. Kress (1997) discusses the debate on young children's writing (and more broadly as literacy) in relation to poverty. He ar-

gues that questions around literacy are intense since historically we are facing a period of social and economic changes. Although we know nothing about our future, there is no doubt that writing will be essential for individuals as well as for society in large. This is one reason, Kress argues, why it is important to scrutinize the debate as well as problematize the talking and thinking about writing. Another reason is that as young children make their paths into writing they do not only learn how to write, they also learn something about what writing is in different settings, educational as well as in out-of-school settings (1997).

This article uses a discursive lens to illuminate how writing and the writing child is constructed in different texts since the nineteenth century in order to further understand children's contemporary educational writing practices; however, from a western perspective. The analysis reveals that it is not unequivocal how children learn to write. Neither is it unequivocal what writing, or text making, entails. The thoughts and ideas of writing and the writing child vary over time and vary according to context. Writing is not neutral, as some children will be privileged while

others will be discriminated against. Certain skills will be emphasized whereas others will be invisible. Writing is without a doubt viewed as an important competence in contemporary debates of what competencies individuals need to make sense of and function well in this globalized and modernized world. Although, Gillen and Hall (2003) and Razfar and Gutiérrez (2003) conducted historical overviews of early childhood writing research and Ivanic (2004) conducted a meta-analysis identifying six writing discourses, there is a scarcity of studies about the transformation of writing, i.e. how writing is influenced by societal needs and discourses. In taking a critical child perspective, this article explores the possibilities to weave new images, to resist and act on in the creation of the talking and the thinking about writing and the writing child. The analysis in this article should be useful to researchers, writing teachers and teacher educators wishing to gain perspectives on dominant ideas about young writers and their educational writing practices. Furthermore, the analysis enables examination of how writing and the writing child are conceptualized, e.g. the inheritance and the current of ideas, how discursive formations combine, develop and contradict images in various ways, and how images effect educational writing practices.

Analytical tools

The concept image will in this article be used as an analytical tool to visualize different ideas about children as writers and their educational writing practices. Repeated and generalized sets of materialized ideas about writing, children as writers and children's writing practices construct images which embody, reproduce and are informed by those ideas (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Hultqvist, 1990). The concept of image is seen as a culturally, socially produced and negotiated construction and is to be seen as a means of *talking about*, and thinking about (Hultqvist, 1990), the child in relation to educational writing situations described in different texts. Some images will be dominant while others will be historically unseen or subordinated, even though they might be as good or as true, each one in its own way.

The interest in this article is founded upon a distinction between the study of what the individual child actually does in writing situations and a study of the history and the influence of political, economical, structural and ideological ideas

of children's educational writing practices at a certain time, to which images of writing and the writing child make an important contribution. Even though these images are not seen as an accurate representation of the way things are at a specific period of time, the essential truth, I will argue that some ideas are made dominant. The images can thus be understood as nodes that temporarily determine and connect different elements and signs, for example methods, material and talk about writing practices (Smith, 1998). The images, in my use, have qualities which adhere, assemble and affect our understanding and implementation of writing and the writing child. They are, for example, embedded in educators' writing instructions as well as in their responses on children's writings.

The introduction of the concept of image raises a need to understand its relationship to the concept of formation. In order to analyze the relations between various images of writing and of the writing child that are produced in educational practices, theories of writing, societal conceptions and didactic models, the starting point is discursive formations (Foucault, 1969/2002), in this article abbreviated to formation. The discursive formation is what keeps together the talking and thinking of writing and the writing child within the empirical data. The production of the articles' four formations is inspired by Foucault's double methodological approach, reflected in the concepts of archaeology and genealogy. On one hand it entails historicizing, i.e. describing the thinking and talking about writing and the writing child in a specific historical context. On the other hand it involves an exploration of the effects of the formations in the form of new ways of conceptualizing writing and the writing child. As the talking and thinking about writing and the writing child are historicized it is also described how the practices produce certain kinds of utterances (Foucault, 1966/2002). In describing types of statements, concepts and choices that "refer to the same object, share the same style and ... support a strategy" (Cousins & Hussain, 1984, p. 84), one can define regularities and dispersions that belong to the same discursive formation (Foucault, 1969/2002, p. 42). In other words, a formation in this article is seen as an expanded context of materialized educational writing practices based on a historical regularity of thoughts and ideas which are received from the talking and thinking about writing and the writing child in a multiple of

written texts. However, a discursive formation is always open, incomplete and contains a multiplicity of ideas and signs and always influenced and challenged by other formations. In this way a formation is much broader and open concept than the image.

Just as the formation establish certain ways of thinking and talking about writing and the writing child, it limits and restricts other ways of what can be said, but it also produces a differentiation of who can say what, i.e. which authorities are legitimized in relation to certain historical circumstances. These limitations, in turn, regulate conditions and requirements stipulated for the young writer in educational settings as well as the choice of theories which create understandings and descriptions of the writing child. It is the presence of these circumstances that make it possible for some images to be dominant on behalf of others in the formations. Different images of writing and of the writing child are in this way produced within the formations. Rather than criticizing or standardizing an image, this article seeks to explore the circumstances of a formation within which different images are created.

Selection of data

In order to gain a perspective on children's contemporary educational writing practices, the purpose was to explore images of writing and the writing child. The collection of empirical data has been guided by Hull and Schultz's (2001) review process used when analyzing the historical roots of current theories on literacy in out-of-school settings. The aim of current study is to get as detailed a picture as possible concerning thoughts and ideas of writing and young writers produced in a variety of texts. Thus, the review process has consisted of a large and wide selection of texts rather than concentrating on few specific documents (Hull & Schultz, 2001). My empirical material has consisted of log books and reports, journals of a national union and manuals for teachers, national curriculums and the Swedish Education Act, as well as research within the fields of writing, early childhood education and childhood studies. The search covered texts from the middle of the nineteenth century since that was when the first Swedish schools (folkskola) were prescribed by law, in 1842 to be exact, and when learning to write slowly moved into the arena of institutional schooling.

The first step of the review process concerned getting a good overview of all possible thoughts and ideas of writing and young writers in order to identify analytical dimensions that would guide the work throughout the next step in the process. In the second stage of the review process there was a directed focus towards finding central texts within the analytical dimensions: (1) educational practices, (2) theories of writing, (3) societal conceptions and (4) didactic models. The aim for this analysis is concerned with discovering and describing places where thoughts and ideas of writing are formulated. It is natural to use a strategic selection of texts that in various ways characterize regularities of thinking about young writers and writing within a specific period (Hull & Schultz, 2001); texts that had great impact and may led to a flux of thoughts about writing.

The collection and the systematic analysis has been a continuous process rather than separated parts. In order to gain an overview of writing and the writing child, peer reviewed articles were initially collected in the subject database ERIC, INSPEC and CSA Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA) as well as in the common database Academic Search Elite and DiVA. To identify dominant thoughts and ideas of writing and the writing child, publications were first and foremost surveyed in a database search using five key descriptors: writing, child*, early childhood, education, and literacy with demarcation to peer reviewed articles in Sweden in order to map the national research within the field. However, remarkably few articles are published within the field of writing related to early childhood which called for continuous changes in the search process such as an extension of search terms where 'early childhood literacies' and 'multimodality' were included. Also, a limited ancestral search (Cooper, 1989) of reference lists within texts that met the demarcations for the survey was conducted to identify additional data. In addition, the scarcity of research called for the need to include relevant articles and texts from countries other than Sweden. Demarcation was made to Anglo-Saxon countries since research within the area has been lively in those countries as well as influential within the Swedish research context.

As this article concentrates on writing and children as writers, which belongs to the broad field of literacy, focus has been made as far as possible to studies dealing with the zero- to

eight-years age range (here denominated young children or young writers) related to writing. For instance, research on reading alone was excluded, but studies examining both reading and writing or literacy were included due to that a great number of studies concurrently explored these aspects, whereas only a smaller number of studies with a specific focus on writing and writing practices related to the years of early childhood were found. Therefore, the analysis of research is initially made from research on literacy where writing is part of the investigation. Works published in edited volumes, surveys on researches and book-length studies during the same period have also been an asset when looking for previous research in the area.

FOUR FORMATIONS OF WRITING AND THE WRITING CHILD

The following four formations depend critically on what is talked about and thought about in the surveyed texts, and thereby described as the writing child and as writing. Writing is a rather ambiguous term which is here used to describe both a product, such as children's growing control of handwriting, spelling or punctuation, and a process, for instance the emergent control of how to shape different meanings. In the upcoming section diverse problems or aspects will be reconstructed and described in relation to educational practices, theories of writing, societal conceptions and didactic models.

The four identified formations come under the headings of; *The formation of writing as skills*; *The formation of writing as developmental*; *The formation of writing as social*; and *The formation of writing as semiotic activities*. The description of each formation will start out with a vignette, a short scene of children's writing events, adapted from reports of research and logbooks, offered in order to highlight representations of the children's writing activities, didactic models, and educational practices. The following four formations are described with the caution that these various formations are certainly not independent of one another, and that a different analysis of the variation might be equally defensible.

1. *The formation of writing as skills*

School-master Stav starts to dictate as soon as Martin and his classmates are seated, "He has

beans in his sieve to eat with his tough meat, and receives with pleasure and relief the beams of the sun through the boughs." (Martinsson, 1935/1936, p. 197). The children are in peace and quiet writing the spelling words. Martin purrs with delight that it's "only to have to spell properly, and that's nothing." (p. 198). He hides his spelling with his body. He feels like a king over the ee-sounds and a prince of the gh-sounds (Martinsson, 1935/1936).

Harry Martinsson provides us with this vignette of Martin from his biographical childhood description (Martinsson, 1935/1936). In the early twentieth century, Martin was seen as an educated boy since he was a good speller¹. However, when school inspector Ernst Westberg discussed writing and spelling in the Swedish Journal of Teachers (Westberg, 1928) he also brought out the opposite, children who associated writing and spelling to agony. According to the Swedish curriculum plan of 1919 (Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor, 1920), writing within the first year of school should consist of learning "small letters, capital at proper noun and at the beginning of a sentence." (p. 30). Readings of writing within this document show a focus on spelling as well as handwriting. It is rare to find self told stories of specific writing situations like the one about Martin, from the end of the nineteenth century. Even though the talking and thinking about writing started to spread in Sweden at this period of time (Svensk Läraretidning, 1894), it is almost solely found in ideological documents. A discourse on the insufficiency of public writing skills emerged at this

1. In this vignette it is shown how Martin possesses the skills of spelling different ee-sounds. The vignette is taken from the English translation of Harry Martinson's *Nässlorna blommar* (Martinsson, 1935/2000), *Flowering Nettle* (Martinsson, 1935/1936). This example mirrors the spelling rules saying when to write *ie* and *ei* in words containing the 'ee-sound' whereas the original work of Martinsson (1935/2000) shows the rules of the swedish [ç]- and [ʃ]- sound as in 'tjära' and 'skjuter' in the example: ...Han bränner tjära och förtjänar därav mera än en tjuvskytt som skjuter tjädrar tjogtals. ..." (p. 199). Out of seven spellings of the ee-sound, Walford (Martinsson, 1935/1936) gets in three in this example: *ea* in beans, eat, meat, beams; *ie* in relief, and, after c, *ei* in receives. In pleasure, however, *ea* represents [e] and in sieve, *ie* stands for a short i-sound. Being able to spell the different sounds correctly is in other words a skill that Martin and his classmates were expected to attain.

period of time, and the demands on the working masses increased to involve the mastery of basic writing skills (Thavenius, 1999) such as knowing the sound/symbol relation, decode letters, being able to spell and write by hand: skills that were seen useful when copying texts, writing your name, making notes and memos, or when keeping small records (Svensk Läraretidning, 1933; Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor, 1920). The task for society was to see to that the majority of the population acquired a minimum of the basic rules and norms of the writing system, which in turn led to the formal model of writing skills in educational settings (Richardson, 1977/2010, p. 95ff). This was also a time when researchers from the discipline of psychology began to take a specific interest in young children's relationship with written language (Wilmenius, 2003).

The question of who had the authority to teach children to write was not a matter of course (Thavenius, 1999; Richardson, 1977/2010). Parents and churchmen had up until schools were instituted a natural authority to teach children to read and write when so needed. When the school was instituted in the middle of the nineteenth century, teachers took for granted that the children had learned to read and write at home as before; however, parents did not have their children at home any more and assumed that learning to read and write was something children should do in school (Wilmenius, 2003). A societal response to this fracture of responsibility was the establishment of elementary schools, which occurred 1858 in Sweden (Längsjö & Nilsson, 2005). Teachers now needed formal education and a teaching degree to get the authority to teach reading and writing in school year one and two. The pedagogical methods and techniques were in that way not only controlled but also adjusted to the emerging society.

While the elementary teachers were the writing authority in schools, the experts were a small number of researchers, most often from the field of psychology. Among the small group of researchers who were engaged in the field of reading and writing, there was a great dominance of research on reading in contrast to the learning of writing. For example, motivation was to take part in daily life. Reading newspaper was something for the fathers and reading religious texts was something everyone should be able to do. Writing, however, was not a re-

quired ability for handling daily life including work. Industrial workers, as an example, received and offered oral information through the foreman (Wilmenius, 2003).

One did not learn to write until one had the understanding of the principle of the alphabetic system, therefore writing instructions came after children had learned to read. Reading and writing were primarily seen as perceptual activities centred on sound/symbol relationships which demanded an explicit education (see Olson, 1994). As Goodman (1991) describes the talking and thinking about writing as skills, words are viewed as key units. It starts in phonics, before developing words, phrases and content, in other words by breaking down writing into separate skills, a hegemonic discourse of decoding and encoding is produced. Furthermore, readings of the Swedish Journal for Teachers from the turn of the nineteenth century show an emphasis upon observable writing behaviors and a clear distinction between being able write and not being able to write. Moreover, learning to write was only likely to take place if children were mentally or physically ready (SOU 1997: 108; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). According to Teale & Sulzby's (1986) historical discussion, neither researchers nor teachers considered the very young child (up to the age of six or seven) as a writer (nor reader). Children had to wait until they arrived in school to be educated in reading and it was not until they could read properly that they could learn how to write². This may be an effect of the prevailing readiness perspective assuming that children had to wait until mentally or physically ready.

The construction of the young writer was of someone that needed to be taught and trained given skills "after the teacher's prescription" (Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor, 1920, p. 30). The vignette of Martin illustrates that writing equaled getting it right and the writing child may be interpreted as an object to fill with formal writing skills. The importance of spelling was unquestioned; however, the methods were sometimes questioned. Teacher Bohlin discussed for example how to support young children's spelling in the *Swedish Journal of Teachers* (Svensk Läraretidning, 1933). Bohlin confirmed that the main feedback children received came in the form of the teacher's official corrections, usu-

2. See Teale and Sulzby (1986) for an historical review.

ally written in red ink and usually focusing upon grammar. However, Bohlin urged colleagues not to correct children's writings so it "will harm the pupil" and gives several examples on how to avoid harm (p. 195). Even though there should be no harm, the dominant knowledge, skills and cultural values are predetermined by adults (Wilmenius, 2003). Both knowledge and experiences were chosen and provided for young writers by the teacher, which relates to the writing child being seen as incapable, powerless and in need of adult protection – the child's agency could be viewed as insignificant. The dominant image of the early writer was not a writer from the child's own perspective; a becoming adult writer was projected on the young writer.

Researchers and educators were seeking the best methods and procedures in order to make it possible for children to reach the predetermined outcomes, as in spelling and handwriting (Ewald & Garne, 2007; Luke, Carrington & Kapitzke, 2003). From this point of view, research on writing often regarded the learning of mechanics of translating, either speech into writing or meaning into visual symbols (Sperling & Freedman, 2001). Hence, writing instructions consisted mainly of spelling instructions, assigning and correcting papers together with grammar skills. For example, the Pählman's writing method showed how to reach the best outcomes in handwriting through detailed prescriptions for correct penmanship and muscular training movements (Pählman, 1939).

In summarizing this formation, the dominant image of a young adult writer has the quality of expressing a sense of form and structure, showing a writing child in need of external skills such as spelling, syntax, phonological awareness and handwriting, primarily learned through methods affixed to it. The aim was to learn a minimum of writing skills with the intention that children should be able to manage functional writing for future daily life. The formal model of skills fits well in a time when basic writing skills were perceived as sufficient for most children (and adults). Society had no use for a large group of skilled writers since only a few appointed writers worked with official or advanced text-production. It is shown in this formation how the formal model of writing skills sprung out of societal needs and demands of its time. The image of formal writing skills dominated early childhood writing education for a long time and has lived on through several

changes in society as well as communicational needs. The writing *child* will in this way be imperceptible for the benefit of a young adult writer – a young adult writer which involves knowing the basic skills of writing.

2. *The formation of writing as developmental*

It is Klara's first-ever week of school. She likes to write and the whole class is at this moment writing individual name tags. As she is sitting on her desk writing her name with crayons, Klara's teacher says it's ok to draw something as well. Klara knows exactly what to draw, an elephant. The huge elephant at the circus! She writes LFT right under the picture of the elephant, takes the name tag and walks over to the teacher's desk. Klara's teacher starts to fill out a sheet as she asks Klara to tell about her picture. "The elephant was real. And soo big! He lived at the circus." she explains. Suddenly Klara stops telling about the circus, wondering what the teacher is marking on her sheet. The teacher says: "You see. You are seven years old. And when one is seven, it's normal to write elephant just like you do. Next month I will make marks again because then you have learned to write even more."

This vignette of Klara is a fictive story based upon Bear and Templeton's developmental spelling research (1998)³. It is, according to Bear and Templeton, important to understand the development course that children follow as they learn "the nature of the spelling system – the layers of information the system reflects" (p. 223). They recommend grouping of children according to developmental spelling levels and advise teachers, like Klara's teacher, to assess any writing behaviour to make developmental checklists. The teachers are also urged not to forego formal spelling instructions (Bear & Templeton, 1998).

The thinking and talking about writing as developmental was the dominating theme during the middle of the twentieth century. The Post-war Period was a time with societal changes of structure where a larger group of people in a large number of different professions needed more advanced writing skills (Richardson, 1977/2010; Dahl, 1999). Writing became more frequent, more diverse and included a larger group of people. In a time with increasing demands upon efficiency, a solution was built on

3. For a Swedish example on writing as developmental, see Lundberg's (2008) five dimensions on writing development.

the principle that there is a time for everything. With efficiency in mind, a universal knowledge about children's writing was needed that could be used in different contexts and with different children. Contemporary researchers started to ask questions about how children become literate and about their development of writing. Questions such as 'What is to be expected at this or that age?' and 'What are normal or abnormal writing skills?' were on the research agenda. The field of psychology was to bring forward a map over the *good* development (Leahey, 2000).

Unlike the emphasis of basic, often fragmented, writing skills within the formation of writing as skills, the vignette of Klara suggests following a predictable development course (Schickedanz, 1990). These assumptions were rooted in a developmental psychological framework (see for example the work of Arnold Gesell, 1943/1971, and Jean Piaget, 1959/2002, 1929/1997), assuming that every child goes through an individual development but that the development simultaneously follows predictable normal development stages related to age (Gesell and Frances, 1943/1971). Therefore, everything had to be taught in a predictable order. The stages worked as an arithmetic average for all children and those who did not meet the norm was placed in remedial classes with experts attending to the child's difficulties.

The educational system focused on diagnosing children and finding educational methods for children to facilitate society. New experts, such as speech trainers, speech therapists, remedial teachers and hearing trainers, worked with children who did not meet the predictable norm of writing development (Erixon Arreman & Strömberg, 2009). The new system of experts was a technique through which to regulate and control the writing child (see Rose 1999, s. 101ff).

The vignette of Klara illustrates the contemporary thinking and talking about how children learn to write according to a predictable pattern. Liberg (2003) describes how writing from a developmental point of view was often seen as a linear process and writers were defined and described as maturing on the road to becoming adults. The biological stages were considered predetermined and similar for all children. It was often said: "Just wait till he/she is ready". 'Readiness' was in the twentieth century a key word when talking about early schooling and writing. The constructed image of writing within the developmental formation implied certain

naturalness in learning to write. Children's natural writing development followed a predictable pattern including circular scribbles, linear continuous scribbles, letter-like symbols, and finally actual letters. Another notion within this formation was that writing emerges in individuals as a consequence of being engaged in a context of writing. The effect of these assumptions is an explosion for instructional materials and work books (Luke, Carrington & Kapitzke, 2003). It also brought about a great increase in standardized tests (Erixon Arreman & Strömberg, 2009). The child's development was regularly documented in scales or matrixes with prescribed stages. Different areas, such as errors in spelling, were regulated in relation to standard spellings. The intention was to follow the child's development but also to identify children at risk at an early stage. Name writing, as an example, shows a predictable course which makes it potentially useful in screening developmental delays (Hildreth, 1936; Haney, 2002). The different stages implicate the child's maturity as a writer.

One of the first early researchers on developmental writing is Hildreth's study (1936) of developmental sequences in young children's name writing. Her study is an example of research producing an image of the normal development of writing, a characteristic within developmental theory. In short, writing starts with being able to write your name and simple words and develops into an ability of writing more and more complicated texts.

The early work of Hildreth (1936) received very little attention in the 1930's. Even though her work envisaged that young children begin to learn about writing long before entering formal education, most research considered predominantly the early school years and children less than six years of age were excluded. Forty years would elapse before the perceptions of a very young writer were taken up again by the research field of emergent literacy (Clay, 1975; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Söderberg, 1997).

Even though the child as a writer can be envisioned in Hildreth's study, the most central image of the writing child within this formation has the quality of showing the writer as a 'becoming' – as an embryo adult (Woodrow & Brennan, 2001). Not a young adult writer who either knows or does not know the basic writing skills, but a becoming adult writer, a writer under development. The term becoming relates to a child under development (James & James,

looking at literacy was more and more adopted in educational settings (Luke & Luke, 2001).

The array of research questions was extended when trying to understand children's writing in relation to social and cultural aspects of their homes and communities. Seminal work, e.g. Heath (1983) and Dyson (1997), was part of the shift of interest towards social phenomena⁴ and a turn towards a dominance of qualitative writing research focusing on social contexts during the end of the twentieth century (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Juzwik et. al., 2006).

Some of the first studies were individual case studies made by researchers studying their own children (Crago & Crago, 1983, and Bissex, 1980, in Gillen & Hall, 2003). These showed that children had complex abilities and writing behaviors used when making texts or drawings, long before they began formal schooling. These studies were part of the field of emergent literacy studies. The concept emergent literacy was coined by Teale and Sulzby (1986) from Mary Clay's dissertation title, *Emergent Reading Behavior* (1966). Clay's further work in New Zealand (1975) provided a change in focus from attaching no importance to the nature of writing outside of schooling to emphasizing that children learn about writing through every day interactions. Clay described the behaviors used by young children when writing, even though the children could not actually read and write in a conventional sense. The result showed for example that invented spelling, which in earlier formations (skills and development) was seen as trivial, was seen as critical and it also showed that writing is a gradual learning in interplay with others. Her study, together with the works of Read (1971) and Goodman (1986) are examples of research exploring how writing is used long before formal education.

At the end of the twentieth century, different writing situations outside school and functions of writing in a child's life were exposed and the relationship between childhood and language became an increasing field of interest for researchers. The Russian psychologist Vygotsky's (1978) interest during the early twentieth century, in how the learning relationship between children and their culture developed, had a revival in contemporary western societies. Vygot-

sky argued that language is experienced around the child and is used by the child in the flow of experience. A special interest was paid to ways in which children use many meditational tools of their culture to construct meaning. Growing interests in cultural socialization led researchers to document and analyze writing activities that take place outside school in everyday life and literacy as a social practice became a dominant theme in literacy studies. Researchers explored how children develop ideas and knowledge about literacy in their homes and how this was related to their literacy experiences in schools (Heath, 1983). The study of Fast (2007) highlights the kinds of literacy events that children participate in as part of everyday life. In a Swedish longitudinal ethnographical research study, seven children at the age of four were followed till the age of seven. She was interested in seeing through what social and cultural practices these children took part in literacy events in their families. Fast (2007) showed in her study that the children were socialized into literacy events via their culture, traditions, language and religion, and that the literacy events frequently were related to popular culture and media.

As the social and functional view on early childhood literacy gained ground, the view on writing changed. New frameworks for studying the nature of reading and writing in diverse areas were established and referred to as the 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) (Gee, 1990, Street, 1993) as well as to the 'New London Group' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Studies conducted by members in these two groups together gave rise to a qualitative and socio-cultural development within writing research. The context in which early childhood writing took place became an important field of research as well as studies concerning the writer's interaction with others and the text production. Studies tended to show an image of development as much more varied and unpredictable and contextualized (Säljö, 1988; Vygotskij, 1978) than described in earlier perspectives and the conception that all children were universal children started to falter. The understanding of writing was repositioned as a much more dynamic and interactive process. Important findings were made showing how children very precisely work with both reading and writing and do not separate the two since reading and writing are both needed when for example conveying a message. It was these meanings that were carried forward and devel-

4. See also Söderbergh (1977), Kress (1997); Cope and Kalantzis, (2000) for further examples of writing as social phenomena.

oped by researchers (Söderbergh 1977; Kress 1997, Dyson, 1997).

As within the field of emergent literacy, the result of these studies showed that writing begins with the very youngest and involves much more than individual and conventional abilities to write. The contemporary study of Björklund (2008) also takes note of the very youngest children's writing in an Early Childhood Education context. Here the Early Childhood Education setting is emphasized with the very youngest children (one and a half to three years old). She has focused on children's participation and actions in literacy events. She found a large diversity in the activities' function, form and purpose. As in the earlier individual case studies (Crago & Crago, 1983, and Bissex, 1980, in Gillen & Hall, 2003) based on out-of-school activities, Björklund noticed that small children in Early Childhood Education settings also saw themselves as writers and readers, including reading and drawing/writing as well as telling and retelling narratives, singing and other verbal and non verbal forms of communication.

While the writing child was positioned as a maturing individual for a long period of time during the twentieth century, a slightly different perspective emerged during the end of the century that stressed the importance of the child's own activities (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). The child is seen as a competent writing child (Björklund, 2008). Likewise, the new perspective positioned the adult as an active agent, able to guide the developing child. The child is described in relation to a context, to adults or society and as part of a socially constructed phenomenon (James & Prout, 2001; James & James, 2004).

In the social formation of writing, the child is seen as a competent child, active and resistant, a formation in which development and socialization occur in mutual relation between the child and the environment as well as others (James & Prout, 2001; James & James, 2004). In other words, the child is regarded as an active constructor of its own childhood while making meaning through interaction with the surrounding world and others (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Street, 1993; James & Prout, 2001; Greene & Hogan, 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). According to this discourse, children's development and socialization have adopted a more dynamic process between the child and the environment, a sociocultural perspective in

which writing practices are understood as socially and historically situated (Barton, 2007) and where children's experiences are central. Collaborative writing; a method focusing on social relationships and social contexts, imply that several writers work together to co-author a text. The method developed and gained popularity during the 1970's due to certain benefits associated with the social and functional view on literacy (Shuman, 1993). It is argued that collaborative writing is beneficial as it gives children experiences for future life since much of adults' professional writing is co-authored. Still another benefit is that the method displaces authority in single-authored texts. Shuman (1993) has explored collaborative writing within the context of authority. She claims that collaborative writing per se does not undermine authority and that similarly single-authorship per se is not always authoritative.

In summarizing the formation of writing as social phenomena, the dominating image has the quality of illustrating a competent and active young writer. Collaborative writing may serve as an example of the thinking and talking about writing where writing is about creating meaning in order to understand the world (Shuman, 1993). The image of writing is that writing should be meaningful and useful to children and may also be seen as a stage to some future state. The image of the writing child is both about *being* a writer and *becoming* a writer. The young writer is embedded in the social world.

4. *The formation of writing as semiotic activity*

Five-year-old Liam is making a writing plan to tell what he knows about the rainforest. The class is in the middle of a cross-curricular theme, The Rainforest. Liam uses different images filled with details, colours, space, layout, as well as letters to summarize and communicate what he knows. He is for example drawing an image of a tree and a parrot which serve as nouns showing key features of the rainforest and he uses white spaces between the images instead of punctuation to separate his ideas. He continues to color the parrot in blue, red and green, which may act as visual adjectives. Liam presents all he knows as pictorial and verbal information in a multimodal text. (Bearne, 2005)

Liam shows that it is possible to combine different modes such as words, drawing and layout. The vignette of Liam that serves as a representa-

tion of the image of a multimodal writer is adjusted from Eve Bearne's descriptions of what multimodal texts are and how children use them (2005; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2004).

The talking and thinking of children's use of different modes, i.e. "socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning" (Kress, 2009b, p. 54), gained a boost at the end of the twentieth century and is referred to as the visual turn (Jewitt, 2009). Writing as a mono mode is very rare in settings of early childhood education. Multimodal texts are for example used in picture books where different modes are combined as they are woven together to make different kinds of texts (Jonsson, 2006). Research studies (Rowe 1994; Kress, 1997) emphasize the fact that children alternate between modalities as their intentions shift. Research also shows that the belief of many that children use symbols because they cannot write appears to be wrong. Even children's print-based writing very often involves visual elements such as varied sizes, shapes and colours of typeface and fonts. Children have in this way always been producing multimodal texts; however, the ways in which multimodal texts are modally realized have been extended by for example the rapid development of digital technologies (Jewitt, 2009). Screen-based texts, as an example, use images, sound, animated movements, and other modes of representation and communication (Kress, 1997; Dyson, 1997; Bearne, 2005; Björkqvall & Engblom, 2010). The extension of modes is also realized in the newspaper or on websites, as advertisements or as information leaflets. Logically, digital technologies are influencing and changing the activities that children are engaged in, which in turn are influencing and changing literacy. These changes also play an increasing role for children's living circumstances where childhood is more and more produced through cross-national flows of values and images. This would implicate a shift "from a theory about language alone to a theory that can take account of different components of meaning" (Bearne, 2009, p. 157).

The image of writing as a semiotic activity, i.e. when children like Liam are exploring the relationship between words, drawings or even gestures, and its meaning (Van Oersa, 1994), provides an alternative way of conceptualizing learning to write. This formation of writing as semiotic activity does not reject formal knowl-

edge of writing but emphasizes that formal skills are not sufficient to meet the writing demands in today's information society. Neither do children wait to learn till they are ready, which becomes obvious in the way children are acquainted to the internet and moving pictures from an early age (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). In relation to the conceptions of the communicational needs of today, the semiotic perspective is embedded in different contexts and relations. It considers "the personal appropriation of signs and the underlying meaning structures embodying relationships between signs" (Ernest, 2006), and includes children's creativity in using semiotic resources as well as the underlying social rules for using these resources (Kress, 1997). In this way writing, seen as a semiotic activity, draws together the individual and social dimensions which are equally essential. Writing is, according to Kress, always about constructing and reconstructing processes where children's interests are essential for the production. Therefore, he argues, it is important that the surrounding understands writers as '*language makers*' (like Liam) instead of '*language users*' (p. xvi). In other words, the image of the writer is as a competent user *and* a creative constructor, someone who may take the freedom of action, but not always as expected. When producing a text the child constructs and reconstructs something new which in its sense was never done before. In the word of Kress writing is, from a more general point of view, a resource that is used to develop new knowledge and new ways of describing, understanding and managing the world. Even though studies like Kress's (1997) and Dyson's (1997) explore how young children construct and reconstruct meaning using different modes, there is critique that most of the studies within the field of writing, including writing in relation to new technologies, promote abilities to handle conventional alphabetic print texts. Lankshear and Knobe (2003) state that most studies "involve 'reading/receiving' text-mediated meanings rather than 'writing/generating' meanings" (p. 77). It is also confirmed that there is an emphasis on using new technologies to overcome the conventional alphabetic print texts rather than to generate multimodal texts or to understand principles of making multimodal meanings.

In the informational society of today, researchers such as Fast (2007), Kress (1997) and Bearne (2009) argue that the new and different social practices, cultures, media etc. which children are

experiencing in their daily lives, ought to be a starting point for school-based literacies in order to prepare the children for life in an ever-changing world. Varied media recourses should be seen as a bridge to a more traditional literacy curriculum in school settings (Bearne, 2009). This notion implies a child that is willing and capable to act flexibly in a constantly changing environment; a writer who, for example, makes conventional school entered written texts correspondingly moving digital stories. Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001) are critical in the discussion of children's as becoming more flexible and more responsible for the maximization of their selves. They state that one may understand flexibility as a constructed, controlled and formed ability needed to participate in the society of today. From a very early age the constructed flexible writer utilizes a rich range of ways to make meaning and selects the best possible means for doing it in the way they intend to make meaning (Evans, 2005; Bearne, 2009; Kress, 2009a).

As the image of a flexible writing child adapting to different contexts, the image of a critical writing child takes it one step further in trying to take action, influence and pursue in order to get a change for themselves or others. The quality of the dominant image, a flexible, creative and responsible writing child, conveys a sense of power and action. Vasquez (2004) describes in her study how four-year-old Anthony together with his classmates takes action when they are going to have a barbecue. Anthony is a vegetarian but only all-beef hamburgers and hot dogs will be served. As the children find out more about vegetarians they decide to write a letter to the chair of the school barbecue committee saying "...Vegetarians need food too. They don't eat meat so they can't eat at the barbecue..." (p. 106). The young children in Vasquez's classroom may in this way think about "what they do with that reading and writing, and what that reading and writing does to them and their world" (Comber & Kamler, 1997, p. 101). The effect is a competent, responsible, flexible and acting writing child, able to create and write their own world (Vasquez, 2004).

In summary, the formation of writing as a semiotic activity provides an alternative way of conceptualizing learning how to write. Kress (2000a) argues in the text *Why? and Why now?* for the need to set "a new agenda of human semiosis in the domain of communication and representation" (p. 183) which in turn requires

theorization and description of the full range of semiotic modes. Existing language-based theories of communication are, according to Kress, inadequate because they are founded on an understanding of 'one-mode-language-alone' (2000b). If language is viewed as a semiotic activity, difference, change and creativity will be in focus (Fairclough, 2000). Fairclough argues for a use of social theory of language because it brings together a theory of language structure and a theory of discourse, which does not mean a rejection of formal knowledge of writing but emphasizes that formal skills are not sufficient to meet the writing demands in today's information society. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) together with Kress (2000b) make a contribution to this discussion by incorporating the concept 'design' that according to them refers to both structure and agency. In other words, design is seen as a process "in which the individual and the culture are inseparable" (p. 203).

REFLECTIONS ON CRITICAL ASPECTS

This article describes how sets of materialized ideas about writing, children as writers as well as their educational writing practices are articulated in different images. Also, formations are portrayed as ideas evolving of the talking and thinking about writing and the young writer in relation to educational practices, theories of writing, societal conceptions and didactic models. Looking through the discursive lens used in this article it becomes visible how these factors are materialized and hereby produce formations that order how to practice, articulate and understand writing. The analysis also reveals how formations order and stress certain aspects of writing and images of the writing child, whilst others become invisible or less meaningful and important. Moreover, there is a production of hierarchy, in which certain children are made normal and others marginalized as a result of the fact that certain aspects of writing and the writing child are emphasized within the formations. At the same time the formations combine, develop and contradict images in various ways.

Even though the discursive analysis of images is small-scaled, it does serve to highlight different aspects of images of writing and the writing child. Unexamined and unchallenged images carry a potential to blind us, as Erica Burman (2008) points out, or a potential to reinscribe traditional and taken-for-granted educational

practices, didactic models, theories or societal conceptions. Therefore the upcoming section will attempt to inquire into and problematize certain aspects of different images and formations in the light of a critical child perspective – a perspective which involves viewing the writing child as a becoming, constructed in a continual production of unique events rather than fixated in a certain way (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Saar, Hägglund & Löfdahl, 2009). It will be discussed how dominant images reflect and produce normality and hierarchy. In other words, what child is the good and normal writer, and who is in need for special support.

Images reflect and produce normality and hierarchies

As formations order and emphasize certain aspects of the writing child, other aspects become less meaningful and important. For example, the image of the young adult writer, which has its roots within the formation of writing as skills, implied a writer who needed to be taught and trained given skills “after the teacher’s prescription” (Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor, 1920, p. 30). Basic writing skills became meaningful and important for children when learning to write in order to have a well-functioning adult working life. The adult writer was projected on the young child, who is in this article denominated ‘the young adult writer’. By contrast with the young adult writer, a young writer with agency, expressing his or her own thoughts, wishes or experiences was not emphasized in the talking and thinking about educational writing practices, didactic models, theories of writing, nor in societal conceptions. These aspects of the writing child in some sense became invisible. When the image of the young adult writer dominates and produce normality, writing practices tend to be framed by rules and expectations of what is conceptualized as the normal writing behaviour. The analysis of the formations reveals how the dominant image of the young adult writer has lived on through the formations and how the adult writer is to this day projected on the child, here and now (see Fast, 2007; Kress, 1997; et al). Learning to write is many times viewed as preparing for adult life.

Though the image of the young adult writer is identified to live through several formations, the analysis shows that other images may transform throughout the formations. For example, the

thinking and talking about what writing *is* has changed. As described above there has been a focus on skills such as spelling, phonological awareness, and handwriting within the formation of writing as skills. Neither the process nor the meaning making were of importance in the talking and thinking about writing in this formation.

However, process became central within the formation of writing as developmental. In the course of becoming an adult writer it was important to master more and more advanced writing tasks. It became essential to know where the child was in relation to the developmental stages in order to make the right educational moves and for this reason writing abilities were emphasized.

As there was a focus on abilities within the formation of writing as developmental, there was a focus on communication and writing in its social context within the formation of writing as social. Spelling was viewed as less meaningful and receded into the background as creativity came to the forefront.

Within the formation of writing as semiotic activities, the talking and thinking about the use of different modes (e.g. images, colours, and layout) is central in children’s text-making. A neat and tidy handwriting is, for example, less highlighted in today’s digital world. Essential is instead the process of writing as well as the meaning making when using different semiotic resources. Hence, the use of different semiotic resources and how they are used are viewed as important aspects in getting ready for the adult writing life. These are some examples of how some aspects recede into the background at the same time as others come to the forefront and build ideas about normality.

Due to the fact that certain aspects of writing and understandings of the writing child are emphasized within the formations, there is a production of hierarchy, in which certain children are deemed normal and others marginalized. When, for example, the image of the young adult writer is the dominant framework, preparations for adult writing-life are stressed. ‘Preparation for adult writing-life’ indicates that the young writer does not have his or her own entitlement. Good spellers are, for example, deemed normal since that is a skill needed as an adult writer. Young writers, however, may be denied the opportunity to explore their thoughts or to respond to experiences of their lives in writings.

In addition to the prevalence of the young adult writer there is also the close related image of an embryo adult writer, central within the formation of writing as developmental. Universal development and natural growth are ideas that also position the young writer as marginalized, awaiting to be an acceptable adult writer. The image of the embryo adult writer is, for example, giving rise to writing practices involving testing and streaming children. The normal writer is hence a child who follows the predicted writing development, whereas what is described as dysfunctional writing behaviors need special treatment by experts such as speech trainers, speech therapists, remedial teachers and hearing trainers. Processes of globalization have also contributed to the reinforcement of universalized ideas (Lauder et al., 2006) about writing and the writing child. This is evident in development of movements towards standardized national tests as well as large-scale international surveys. This move towards universalization, as part of the globalization process, offers possibilities for new ideas. However, it may at the same time ignore cultural variations and local contexts. For example, the preference of semiotic resource may culturally vary between written productions used in a Swedish classroom or puppetry used in a Japanese classroom. The risk lies in homogenizing ideas about writing and the writing child.

Although sets of images are claimed to produce dominating formations, no single formation has automatic priority. At the same time the formations combine, develop and contradict one another in various ways. Therefore, a fuller exploration of the circumstances within and between formations is needed and useful at a time when literacy crisis infuses fresh life into writing debates. Swedish students' educational literacy results will stand as an example for such literacy crises. Their literacy results tend to grow weak in relation to students in other countries and "there is cause to worry about the trends in the knowledge development of Swedish pupils" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009b, p 42). What is, for example, saying that what is bearing in the formations of writing as semiotic activities will outdo other ideas? For example, mass communication technologies create vast possibilities, but there may still be an intrinsic value in knowing the basic skills of writing that will be central also in the formation of writing as semiotic activity. Issues like the one

just described call attention to important questions such as which writing child will be marginalized and under what circumstances, but also who produces the images and whose interest they serve. These questions are crucial for future educational practices.

Addressing complexities of writing

The issue of how to address the complex image of, for example, the multimodal writing child produced in the formation of writing as semiotic activity, is also of great importance for enhancing understanding and reconceptualizing educational writing practices. Complex images are, according to Liedman and Olausson (1988), compound and tricky to handle within the frame of an institution or an organized activity, such as in Early Childhood Education or in school. It is much harder to organize writing activities from a complex concept than from one which is a straightforward and clear. There is a risk that complex images might be something only for experts such as researchers, or for elite-teachers with a specific interest in developmental work, or for parents holding a complex image of the child. Liedman and Olausson talk about politics as conceptions of reality and they point out that the politicians will fail if their concepts are too far away from reality. The straightforward and clear concept survives. The same argument goes for those who talk about what the majority have experience of which might mean that the talking and thinking about the image of the young adult writer and the future have a much easier time to make their arguments understandable than the ones talking and thinking about a complex multimodal writer - a writer who uses a wide range of semiotic resources in a future we know nothing about. According to Liedman and Olausson (1988) it is easier to handle a straightforward and clear concept and therefore it might not only be just a power struggle that is determined by the internal logics of the discourses but also determined by, for example, how a day in Early Childhood Education is constructed; what are for instance the possibilities to meet the young writer in the morning - a time when restrictions may enter and make the straightforward images take over.

Struggles for dominance

The discursive analysis shows that competing versions of images struggle for dominance in the formations and where these struggles become

visible when exploring the formations from a critical perspective. It is partly in these struggles that opportunities for resistance are offered or where, for example, new didactic models are created. Struggles of dominance emerge as images circulate alongside each other. The image of the young adult writer, i.e. when becoming an adult is projected on the young child, alongside the image of the multimodal writing child will stand as an example. The multimodal child, seen as a writing child who is expected to be independent, playful, original and creative, does not need to know how to write in a conventional way, but may instead create meaning using different semiotic resources, for example by using pictures or boxes and blanquettes (Kress, 1997). In this way a multimodal writer can be part of the culture of writing without using the alphabetic system. One struggle of dominance may concern the degree of independence (or dependence) of the young writer. As the multimodal child is expected to be an independent and creative actor using different semiotic resources like boxes, sound or moving pictures, the young adult writer is expected to follow already set conventions of for example spelling.

Struggle's of dominance such as the one just described are therefore important to make visible in order to be able to problematize the effects it might have on for example the debate on or the understanding of young children's writing and their educational writing practices. As ideological reports of today marginalize basic skills and with that a writer who depends on stability and regularities, an independent multimodal and global writer is at the same time put in the foreground – a writer who from the beginning meets the world second-hand through for instance digital media. The dominant image of the writing child within the formation of writing as semiotic activity is associated to the talking about freedom to be creative and active as writer, whereas the writer who likes to copy is not described as a good writer. The creative and active writer is at the same time obliged to live up to the responsibility that has been given it to be independent, creative and active. Moreover, they are, according to Fendler (1999), obliged to use this responsibility in a productive way in order to live up to the image of, as in the formation of writing as semiotic activity, an independent and creative writer. Fendler refers to 'disciplining souls' (1999, p. 185), a concept which is based on the individual's (read writer's)

development of self regulating technologies. There are, however, risks when critically viewing the self regulating responsibility. A child who speaks another language than the native speaking language or a quiet child will, for example, be marginalized in a formation where the image of a flexible, creative and active writer is emphasized, because they do not live up to the ideas about what young writers are expected to be like. In other words, there is a risk that ideas about self regulating responsibility marginalize both individuals and groups in the society. This risk is made visible in the categorization of writers who meet the norms or educational goals separated from the ones not living up the norms and goals. As a consequence some groups are favoured, like a new middleclass, whereas other groups, not having the social, cultural and academic capital, are marginalized (Sjöberg, 2010).

Another struggle of dominance concerns the degree of responsibility of the writing child. The talking and thinking about the responsibility of the young adult writer might include an active young adult writer, interested in the alphabetic system. However, responsibility might also include a playful young multimodal writer who is expected to be creative, active and able to make meaning using different semiotic resources. The responsible young writer does in a way move the age of adulthood down, whereas the playing writer moves the age of adulthood up. The 25-year-old playing with the computer may serve as an example of the last-mentioned. The age for adulthood-writers does in this sense move up and down, with the effect that it becomes more difficult to maintain ideas of writing as a child and as an adult respectively. So what is then a writing child? The adulthood-writer and the writing child are in this way mutually linked in their changing processes, which, according to Kampmann (2004), means "that we cannot think of children in a new way without automatically affecting our understanding of what it is to be a parent [adulthood-writer]" (p. 148).

The struggles described above are examples of how different images challenge, contradict and interfere with one another. Therefore, understanding how different images of writing and of the writing child might operate for young writers and how different images shape understandings about children's place in the early childhood writing education is as much a project of relevance to the early childhood educators as to politicians and researchers. Close to all reviewed

texts describe, analyze or discuss writing from an adult's viewpoint. In addition, the analysis reveals that there is a lack of agency ascribed to young writers themselves. This in turn has implications on the understanding of writing and the writing child. Also, emphasizing images of writing and the writing child in the public gaze (as is the case with this article) has its implications; it allows adults to reassert their control of writing and of the writing child. However, if the young writer's knowledge and experience of text-making are genuinely to be valued as we try to understand children's writing practices, there is a need for researchers, educators as well as politicians to explore and develop ways in which the child's perspectives are taken. Efforts towards finding a conceptual framework for exploring shared understandings would therefore be an essential contribution to the field of early childhood writing research.

The contribution of researchers and educators is described by Kress with the words:

... [it] is not to saddle them [the writing child] with our nostalgias, with our histories, not to try to anchor them in our pasts. Rather, it is to assess, on one hand, what of that past may be essential for them in their future, and how that might be integrated into means of learning, into curricula, together with the contents of the likely new demands, on the other hand. (Kress, 1997, p. 5).

Thus, there is need to critically engage in the talking and thinking about writing and the writing child as well as in the ongoing struggles between and within different images and formations. From a critical child perspective it is relevant to describe what child is produced in the images, what child is celebrated, what child is made problematic and what child is normalized. Taking a critical child perspective implies a focus on change and transformation as well as on stability and regularity. It is in this article shown that there is a need to develop a more inclusive and multidimensional way of talking and thinking about writing and the writing child in order to address the full complexity of the field of early childhood writing.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

With thanks to The Research School of Childhood Learning and Didactics (RSCLD) financed by the

Swedish Research Council: Educational Sciences 721-2007-3671.

I am grateful to Tomas Saar, Anders Arnqvist and Christina Olin-Scheller, who encouraged this project from its beginning. The research seminar of education at Karlstad University, the research group Work at School at Kristianstad University and The Literacy Research Network of Sweden offered helpful comments on previous manuscript drafts. I also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their attentive reading and feedback.

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