

## Writing Instruction and Writing Research in Denmark

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In Denmark, the educational context for children's first encounter with formal writing instruction is compulsory school, in Danish termed *grundskolen* ("foundational school"), which is mandatory and comprises the first ten years of schooling (students aged 6-15). Hereafter, students shift to vocational or general upper secondary school in new institutional settings, with the majority of students (80 percent) choosing general upper secondary school (students aged 16-18). Grade 0 is the first grade in compulsory school, and it forms a transitional year between kindergarten and school. Grade 0 has its own separate curriculum with learning goals that are recommended but not obligatory, and with regard to writing, young students should experiment with composing short texts and acquire knowledge about the alphabetic principle, writing direction, and sentence composition (Ministry of Children and Education). Hereafter, and thus in the remaining part of compulsory school (grades 1-9), students learn to communicate through writing in still more advanced ways primarily in the language arts subject Danish for which the national curriculum includes obligatory key competence goals specified for writing and multimodal text production. A multi-national analysis of the national language arts curricula in selected countries noted that, in the case of Denmark, students' writing development is conceived to "evolve in relatively linear progression, however, in increasingly contextualised, formalized and disciplinary ways" throughout compulsory school (Jeffery et al. 348; see also Kabel et al.). In recent years there has been an increased awareness among teachers and teacher educators of the need for supporting students' subject-specific writing within the entire range of K-12 school subjects. Actually, in neighboring Norway, it has been a prerequisite since 2006 that each school subject considers writing as one of five basic competences, a development also supported by developmental and research projects on how each school subject may support students' writing (e.g. Berge et al.). In the Danish educational system, similar attention has not—as of yet—been paid to subject-specific writing – despite the growing awareness of its importance.

A particular characteristic of the Danish school system also needs mentioning here: there is a long tradition of teachers enjoying a relatively extensive autonomy in all content areas, including writing (Laursen and Bjerresgaard). Thus, teachers are only obliged to follow key competence goals in grades 1-9; they are not required to apply certain instructional methods or to teach specified curricular content. Regarding writing, two regulations support the Danish

teachers' autonomy: Formal grades are not introduced before grade 8 (students aged 14); the first written composition exam does not take place until grade 9 (students aged 15). However, this first (and final) written composition exam is a high-stakes exam. As a consequence, it has a strong impact on the teachers' choice of both content and instructional approach in the final years of compulsory school (Troelsen). Currently, the compositional exam puts emphasis on students' genre awareness, and in particular on their writing of journalistic opinion genres. In general upper secondary, the picture looks a bit different. In the final composition exam at this level, the students are required to master three generic forms of writing: the analytical (e.g. a literary response), reflective (e.g. an essay), and argumentative (e.g. a journalistic commentary) article.

Major pedagogical trends have contributed to the picture of what writing instruction looks like in Danish K-12 language arts classrooms today. In the 1990s, process-oriented writing pedagogy was in vogue in both compulsory and general upper secondary school in Denmark (Hetmar; Juul Jensen et al.). Although less widespread today, this approach to writing introduced a more thorough approach with response rounds integrated in much current writing instruction, and it introduced a focus on the student and their writing projects—something that also resonated with a general student-centered pedagogy in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 2000s, genre pedagogy (particularly the Sydney School) was introduced in Denmark and gained support, specifically in teacher education (Mulvad). From here, it found its way to textbooks and teaching materials, and it still influences writing instruction in compulsory school. Furthered by genre pedagogy, non-fictional genres in language arts Danish received increased attention. This is reflected in the above-mentioned dominance of journalistic genres in comparison with, for example, fictional genres in the current written composition exam in the final year of compulsory school. In addition to genre pedagogy, an overarching literacy trend since the 2000s pushed forward a focus on reading and writing after the basics learned in the primary school grades. Initially, this trend was an answer to unsatisfying results in international reading assessments such as PISA, in which Denmark participated for the first time in 1991 (Mejding). Later, it developed into two sub-trends. First developed a content area reading trend reflected in a number of in-service courses for teachers, which drew primarily on socio-cognitive approaches to reading comprehension strategies (Block and Duffy). Those courses dominated in the second half of the 2000s. Second developed a disciplinary (Shanahan and Shanahan) or subject-specific trend, which drew primarily on socio-cultural and social semiotic approaches to both reading and writing (Green). Both genre pedagogy and the overarching literacy trend contributed to the more recent attention among teachers and teacher educators towards

the more specific requirements when students engage with texts in still more specialised ways as part of schooling.

In addition to these influential pedagogical trends has been a years-long emphasis on the development of students' personal voice in writing. This emphasis has been especially strong in general upper secondary schools and is accompanied by a particular focus on the importance of fostering identity development through writing (Krogh). This interest in the possibilities for expressing and understanding oneself and the world through writing reflects a strong *Bildung* tradition in Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia. Today, this interest in voice and identity is part of the current picture of writing instruction. For example, the national curriculum for the subject of Danish language arts at upper secondary level now explicitly requires that the students develop a personal voice in creative writing activities, and it points to the reflective article as a format that supports such development of a personal voice (Ministry of Children and Education).

The longish history of pedagogical and curricular attention to writing in Denmark has not always been accompanied by educational writing research. A research environment in Denmark emerged in the 2000s together with the first attempts to build up curriculum research at universities. The establishment of research units at the six Danish university colleges in 2013 furthered this development. In other words, educational writing research is a new field in Denmark, and, as such, it coincides with the recent and heightened attention towards writing in school. In a Scandinavian context, Norway was the frontier when it comes to the early foundation of educational writing research in the 1980s and onwards, and it still plays a leading role today in terms of its volume of educational writing research, even though Sweden does not trail far behind (Bremholm et al.; Iglund and Ongstad).<sup>1</sup> In Denmark, the number of research studies are still quite sparse. One early major writing research project was *Learning to Write, Writing to Learn* (2010–2014), which used a longitudinal ethnographic design to follow student writers and their trajectories in the transition from grade 9 and throughout general upper secondary. The project resulted in empirical knowledge on student writing in school subjects and novel theoretical insights about young people's individual development as writers (e.g. Elf; Krogh and Jakobsen). Currently, an ongoing research project examines early writing development across the grades 0–2 based on a textual model of writing approached as a multidimensional linguistic phenomenon (Kabel et al.). Alongside the emergence of research projects on writing, the growing interest in writing in educational contexts in Denmark is also signalled by a number of developmental projects on writing from about 2000 onwards. These projects were conducted by educational researchers and/or teacher educators, and several of them have had a notable influence on educators and writing

teachers. Developmental projects have been directed at both the lower primary level (e.g., Korsgaard et al.), the upper primary level (e.g., Brok et al.) and the upper secondary level (e.g., Juul Jensen et al.).

A recent study (Holmberg et al.) on language arts PhD dissertations from the Nordic countries conducted and defended between 2000-2017 supports the picture of a new but growing educational writing research field within the last two decades. It showed that one fourth of the dissertations were within the category of writing research. Zooming out, educational writing research in Scandinavia displays – according to a current review (Bremholm et al.)—a majority of explorative and small-scale studies based particularly in socio-cultural and social semiotic approaches to writing, which pave the way both for future intervention and/or large-scale studies and for cross-national studies in the region and beyond.

## Notes

1. Scandinavia consists of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, countries that are culturally close due to neighbouring languages and similarities in educational systems. Scandinavia is part of the Nordic countries that besides the three Scandinavian countries consist of Iceland and Finland. The Nordic countries have fewer but still many similarities.

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