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## Nordic preschool student teachers' views on early writing in preschool

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates preschool student teachers' views on how early writing should be supported in preschool. The sample consists of 66 preschool student teachers from Finland, Norway, and Sweden, who participated in the study by responding to open-ended questions on a written questionnaire. Results show that the respondents' answers were underpinned by holistic views on children's learning; they value children's own initiative as a decisive learning factor. Further, the responses underscore the importance of a writing-inviting environment and the preschool teachers acting as role models. The respondents rarely offered explicit theoretical reasons and arguments for why they would encourage early writing. Based on the findings, it appears critical to discuss within the profession the issue *why* early writing should be encouraged.

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### KEYWORDS

Early writing; preschool student teacher; professional competence; early literacy; support

## Introduction

This study addresses preschool student teachers' views on how to support early writing in preschool. In literate societies, preschool children from an early age typically express themselves on paper or tablet by drawing, scribbling, or writing symbols, letters, words, and sentences. Children often write spontaneously before they start school. For preschool children, early writing is most typically a communicative act and a social activity (Dyson 2010), exhibiting, for example, words, syllables, and phonemes in creative, yet systematic, combinations with letters and symbols (Clay 1975; Read 1971). Thus, the early writing often has social and communicative purposes, but it may also be mainly explorative and serve to familiarise the child with signs, logos, letters, and text in the environment (e.g. Clay 1975; Dyson 2010; Magnusson 2013). Many young

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children have experience with navigating both traditional linear texts and digital texts before starting formal literacy education; this brings both opportunities and challenges to preschool children's entry into becoming writing individuals. Whether the writing takes place with a pen or by keyboard, it invites the child to get a glimpse of the language system itself, which increases their metalinguistic awareness. Recent research has shown that encouraging children's early writing in preschool has a positive impact on their later reading and writing development (e.g. Hofslundsengen, Hagtvet, and Gustafsson 2016; Pulido and Morin 2017). Therefore, preschool teachers may presumably play an essential role in facilitating children's early writing development (Bingham, Quinn, and Gerde 2017; Gerde, Wright, and Bingham 2019). However, preschool teachers' mediating role in supporting children's early writing is an understudied research field (Gerde, Wright, and Bingham 2019).

The current study is conducted within a Nordic context, where children's literacy education by tradition is mainly carried out in school (beginning at ages 6–7). In the Nordic *preschool* tradition (for ages 1–5/6), the emphasis is mainly on oral language skills, social-emotional skills, and motor skills through free play. Literacy is mainly focused upon via shared book reading, which more recently has been supplemented with play-based informal literacy activities, such as phonological 'language games' and child-driven invented writing (Hagtvet 2017). The preschool's role in supporting children's literacy development is, therefore, by tradition limited, as is also knowledge about preschool teachers' professional beliefs on the stimulation of literacy skills. One exception is a study about preschool teachers' beliefs about early literacy (Sandvik, van Daal, and Adèr 2014) that showed a strong relationship between teachers' beliefs and children's daily literacy practices in preschool. With regards to preschool student teachers, however, little attention has been paid to their views on supporting preschool children's early writing. Investigating preschool student teachers' views is important as their views and attitudes can affect their later practice as preschool teachers, which again could influence the children's outcomes. Hall and Grisham-Brown (2011, 149) describe this as a chain that links beliefs to attitudes, attitudes to intentions, and intentions to actions. The preschool student teachers are the new generation of teachers, which will influence the practice field in the upcoming years.

This study investigates the views held by Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish preschool student teachers on how to support preschool children's early writing; they are asked about the organising of the writing environment and about the interaction with the child. Our focus on *students* of the preschool teacher education programme builds on the assumption that their training is updated theoretically and research-based.

### **Theoretical background**

This study builds on a socio-cultural perspective on learning (Vygotsky 1978), with the basic premise that children learn in interaction with more competent peers and adults and by using relevant tools; in our context, writing artefacts. Writing is a complex social and cultural activity that communicates meaning (Vygotsky 1986). Within a socio-cultural perspective, the preschool teacher's role is central to how writing processes and artefacts are introduced, mediated, and modelled: the teacher mediates the children's learning within each child's zone of proximal development through cultural tools. For preschool children to appropriate the function of writing, the writing experiences

must be meaningful to young children (Vygotsky 1997), such as using play activities where writing is needed (see Pramling et al. 2019). This study focuses on the preschool student teachers' views on the two crucial components of stimulation, as highlighted by socio-cultural theory, which are the writing artefacts in the physical environment and the teacher's mediation of children's early writing.

### ***Print and writing artefacts in the physical environment***

The importance of the print environment to promote children's literacy has been stressed in several studies. When studying preschool literacy environments in Sweden and New Zealand, Mellgren and Margrain (2015) found that incorporating signs and symbols in the print environment facilitated children's engagement in literacy learning. In a U.S. context, Gerde, Goetsch, and Bingham (2016) argued that a meaningful print environment supported children's early writing. Experiments enriching preschool play-settings with a larger number of literacy artefacts led to significant increases in the frequency of using such artefacts in play activities and in how much children talked about, for example, letters and sounds when composing (e.g. Neuman and Roskos 1997). It has likewise been documented that the writing environment has direct links to children's name-writing skills (Zhang et al. 2015) and children's letter knowledge in supportive classrooms of high quality (Guo et al. 2012). Pelatti et al. (2014) investigated how much instructional time was used on language- and literacy-learning opportunities for young children and found considerable variability in their sample. On average, 18 minutes per day were used on language and literacy domains, with 3.5 minutes spent on writing; however, 30 of the 81 teachers did not spend any time on writing. Knowledge of how these aspects are implemented in classroom practices is limited, as prominent in these studies conducted mainly in the U.S.

An investigation of physical literacy environments of 131 preschools in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, Hofslundsengen et al. (2020) found that books were present in almost all preschools, signs and the alphabet were displayed in about two-thirds of the classrooms, and about half of the preschool classrooms had a designated writing centre. Nevertheless, the mere availability of writing artefacts is not sufficient for supporting early writing, teachers must also model and scaffold how to use them and encourage early writing (Gerde, Bingham, and Wasik 2012).

### ***Supporting early writing***

As previously mentioned, preschools operate with limitations regarding pedagogical approaches to early literacy. Findings have also shown that little time is spent supporting children's writing development in preschool (Bingham et al. 2018; Gerde, Wright, and Bingham 2019). If this support is provided, it appears to focus more on children's handwriting and spelling skills than their composing and communication skills. Overall, this may suggest a lack of disciplinary knowledge – maybe also a professional language – among preschool teachers regarding the promotion of early literacy (Cunningham, Zibulsky, and Callahan 2009). However, documentation of preschool teachers' handling of early literacy in the classroom reveals increased interest in teachers' support of early writing (Andersson, Sandberg, and Garpelin 2019; Korkeamäki and Dreher 2000; Norling 2014). For example, Norling

(2014) observed that preschool teachers appear unaware of how to challenge children in their writing processes (despite taking an interest in supporting early writing). Korkeamäki and Dreher (2000) found that preschool teachers differentiated between children with different levels of writing experience in their mediation. Their study demonstrated that interactions between preschool teachers and the more experienced children were more complex and involved talking about letters and sounds, while the less experienced children observed their more competent peers. Further, Andersson, Sandberg, and Garpelin (2019) found two prominent approaches among preschool teachers used to support early writing skills. The first approach concerned developing creative and functional writing of messages/stories based on the children's interests, experiences, and level of knowledge, which also included encouraging children to create multimodal texts. The second approach concerned developing technical abilities (e.g. shaping letters and developing phonological awareness). These approaches could be used separately or combined. These three studies illustrate that teacher support could be related to the interplay of instruction, social interaction, and individual needs of children.

Three studies from the U.S. have investigated preschool student teacher's beliefs about early writing (Hall 2016; Hall and Grisham-Brown 2011; Zimmerman, Morgan, and Kidder-Brown 2014). Zimmerman et al. (2014) found that preschool student teachers gained knowledge about teaching writing from participating in a writing course themselves. Changes in attitudes and beliefs after participating in a writing course were also found by Hall (2016). From feeling overwhelmed and unprepared, the student teachers' beliefs about writing and being a writing teacher changed to something manageable, important, and enjoyable. Hall and Grisham-Brown (2011) argued that by examining their own experience as writers, preschool student teachers' beliefs as writing teachers can be built upon, or if needed, be restored, and rebuild. Taken together, these studies indicate not only the importance of beliefs and attitudes, but also the importance of subject knowledge in teacher training.

A handful of studies have investigated the Nordic preschool student teachers' knowledge about language support, in which early writing is included as a smaller part (Gjems, Grøgaard, and Tvedten 2016; Gjems and Sheridan 2015; Nurmilaako 2009). Overall, these students experienced that their education provided them with knowledge about early literacy (Gjems and Sheridan 2015). They emphasised the priority of preparing children for formal literacy education in school (Gjems, Grøgaard, and Tvedten 2016; Nurmilaako 2009), however, not through structured teaching activities in preschool, but mainly by distancing preschool activity from the formal literacy teaching that takes place in school (Gjems, Grøgaard, and Tvedten 2016). Furthermore, the students highlighted the importance of a print-inviting environment (Nurmilaako 2009) and that writing should be on the children's premises through play activities (Gjems, Grøgaard, and Tvedten 2016). In summary, we have little in-depth knowledge about how Nordic preschool student teachers' view how young children's writing development should be supported.

### ***Aim and research questions***

This study aims to investigate preschool student teachers' views on how to support early writing in preschool. More specifically, we asked the following research questions: (RQ1)

What are the students' views on the importance of the physical writing environment, and (RQ2) What are the students' views on the importance of the teachers' mediating role?

## **Methods**

This study used a qualitative design with empirical data from a short questionnaire, analysed with qualitative content analysis.

## **Participants**

A total of 95 preschool student teachers were asked to participate in the study, of which 66 students gave their informed consent: 19 students from Finland, 26 from Norway, and 21 from Sweden. Thus, the participation rate was 71%. The students had completed three to seven semesters in their respective teacher education programmes and earned between 11 and 22.5 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) in courses with early language and literacy. The Nordic preschool systems share many qualities regarding both content and structure (see Hagtvet 2017); hence, we have chosen to treat our sample as one Nordic group. The students have had some practical experience with different preschools, and due to their ongoing higher education programmes, they ought to be updated theoretically about children's writing development. Entry requirements for a preschool teacher education programme are the same in Finland, Norway, and Sweden; the students need an upper secondary school degree for admission. The preschool teacher education results in a bachelor's degree. The length of the programmes is three and a half years in Sweden and three years in Finland and Norway. The curriculum for preschool teacher education is nationally determined in Norway and Sweden; in Finland, a minor part of the curriculum is determined on a national level, and most is locally formulated at each university arranging the preschool teacher education. The literacy courses are inspired by national curricula and early childhood literacy theories and didactics, and they include a focus on language and early literacy, children's literature and story reading, digital skills, multilingual development, and literacy environments. Accordingly, the students had participated in university courses that dealt with the phenomenon of early writing about which we asked questions. Though there are some differences among the three countries, on the whole, there are more similarities in the preschool teacher education curricula.

## **Data collection**

We developed a questionnaire composed of four open-ended questions to investigate preschool student teachers' views about how they would organise a supportive writing environment and how they would support children's early writing. This approach gave the participants time to reason their answers and respond spontaneously (see Reja et al. 2003). The following questions were presented on the questionnaire: (1) If you were to organise an environment that supports children's writing, how would you do it? Motivate your answer; (2) How can you encourage children to write; (3) How can you support children's writing; and (4) In what way do you think writing can strengthen children's literacy development?

The questionnaires were presented to the students either digitally or on paper by their teacher educators, which may explain some variation in the total number of words used in the answers overall (mean = 228; range = 48–1134) and in the individual questions: questions 1 (mean = 82; range = 0–321), question 2 (mean = 57; range = 8–277), questions 3 (mean = 52; range 0–445) and question 4 (mean = 37; range 0–141). The contextual variations regarding the questionnaire presumably affected the answers given by the students because the answers were longer in the digital responses in all questions. Eleven questions were left unanswered with four empty answers on question 1, two empty answers on question 2, and five empty answers on question 4, which is a disadvantage more often seen with open-ended questions than close-ended questions (Reja et al. 2003). Empty answers in response to the fourth question may indicate that the students experienced difficulties in linking early writing to children's literacy development from a meta-perspective. Additionally, two students explicitly stated that they did not understand the question or did not know an answer in response to the first question.

### **Analysis**

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) to describe and interpret systematically the meaning of the data (Schreier 2012). We used an abductive approach governed by a socio-cultural understanding of learning and early writing. The analytical process included three phases: (1) open coding, (2) categorisation, and (3) abstraction (Elo and Kyngäs 2008).

In the phase of open coding, the data were read thoroughly by the third author, who simultaneously created initial data-driven coding frames for each question. To aid in structuring the data, the coding frames encompassed codes that captured relevant aspects of the study aim (see Table 1). Using the coding frames, all authors worked in pairs or a group of three to code the data collaboratively using a word processor. Additional codes were added to the coding frames when needed. After completing the coding phase, the coded data were uploaded to NVivo 11, with 215 different codes. The questionnaire questions were removed at the beginning of the categorisation phase, leaving only the questionnaire answers and the codes. Categorisation of the codes was based on similarities and differences between the meanings of the codes, resulting in 47 categories. To ensure validity in these two analytical phases, the categorisation of the content codes was independently double-coded by two authors. The agreement between the authors were high, leaving only smaller disagreement to be solved by discussions. In the abstraction phase, the categories were interpreted, compared, and evaluated in relation to the two research questions, which resulted in three themes

**Table 1.** Three examples of analysis from open coding to abstraction.

Open coding	Categorisation	Abstraction
Visible letters in the room to inspire interest of early writing	Visible letters and symbols	Physical context for writing
Create stories together with the children	Create stories	Writing activities
Show interest in children's writings	Show interest	Qualities of teacher mediation

with respective sub-themes. During the entire process of analysis, differences of opinion among the coders were discussed until consensus was reached.

## Results

Using QCA, two themes emerged in response to RQ1 and one theme in response to RQ2 (see Figure 1). All themes included several sub-themes. Figure 1 illustrates the themes as well as their main characteristics. All exemplifying excerpts were translated from their original language to English by the authors.

### *The students' views on the importance of the physical writing environment*

#### *Physical context for writing*

The physical context for writing referred to the design of the physical preschool environment (e.g. print environment) where early writing occurs and access to different types of

RQ1: What are the students' views on the importance of the physical writing environment?		
<b>THEME 1</b>	<b>PHYSICAL CONTEXT FOR WRITING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print resources</li> <li>• Writing centre and writing artifacts</li> <li>• Books and reading space</li> </ul>	<b>Characteristics for the physical context for writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visible and variable literacy environment</li> <li>• Easily accessible literacy artifacts</li> <li>• Visible text to inspire towards developing an interest in writing</li> <li>• Displaying children's writings and drawings</li> <li>• Available writing centre and digital writing tools</li> <li>• Arranging a play environment</li> <li>• Books as a gateway to writing</li> </ul>
<b>THEME 2</b>	<b>WRITING ACTIVITIES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play activities</li> <li>• Narrative activities</li> <li>• Reading activities</li> </ul>	<b>Characteristics for writing activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spontaneous and planned activities</li> <li>• Writing in children's play</li> <li>• Make-up stories and write own books</li> <li>• Storytelling</li> <li>• Integrating songs, rhythm, drama, and painting with writing</li> <li>• Reading aloud to connect speech and writing</li> <li>• Arranging library visits</li> </ul>
RQ2: What are the students' views on the importance of the teachers' mediating role when supporting early writing?		
<b>THEME 3</b>	<b>QUALITIES OF TEACHER MEDIATION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pedagogical and ideological focus</li> <li>• Teachers as role-models</li> <li>• Encouragement and reinforcement</li> </ul>	<b>Characteristics for qualities of teacher mediation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build on children's initiative and interest</li> <li>• Meet children at their different developmental levels</li> <li>• Explore and invent writing</li> <li>• Strengthen children's confidence in themselves as writing individuals</li> <li>• Every-day focus</li> <li>• Start with the child's name</li> <li>• Shape and form letters</li> <li>• Be available for interaction</li> <li>• Provide advice and guidance</li> <li>• Be responsive, patient, and put no pressure on the children</li> <li>• Be present in the writing activities</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** Overview of the themes, sub-themes, and their characteristics.



writing artefacts. The context should be visible for the children, and the writing artefacts should be easily accessible when the child's desire to write arises.

**Print resources.** Print resources referred to the visibility of symbols, letters, and the alphabet in the preschool environment. The students stressed that print resources could inspire children towards developing an interest in writing. Print exposure (e.g. letters) should be visible in various places in the classroom and at the children's eye level to invite exploration of their meaning.

I would make the written language visible by having letters on the walls and so on, and different objects would have their word attached to them. (Finland)

If you have the alphabet within the children's height, they can come into more "contact" with the letters. You can also hang up papers where the children can try to write the letters. (Norway)

Pictures with accompanying text in the classroom. For example, next to the children's pictures are their names, but also pictures and text of what to wear when you go on an excursion, schedule for the day that you can go through at gatherings in the morning. (Sweden)

Students wished to display children's texts and drawings on the walls, thereby exhibiting multimodal creations (text, images, symbols, and numbers). Overall, the environment should contain different symbolic systems; for example, one student mentioned displaying letters from different alphabets.

**Writing centre and writing artefacts.** Writing centre and writing artefacts referred to a designated place for writing and writing materials, which was described as important in a supportive writing environment. Writing artefacts could favourably be placed in several places in the classroom, and the placement of the writing centre could offer possibilities to combine writing and play and writing collaboratively. The students emphasised availability, variety, and visibility.

By providing both paper and pencils, and so on. (Norway)

A writing centre – there should be materials such as paper, pencils, letters, envelopes to entice the children to draw and write letters to friends, family, or someone else. (Sweden)

A mailbox could be placed in the writing centre for children to write letters to each other, thus, highlighting the communicative aspects of writing. The students emphasised providing children opportunities to explore writing by hand and with digital tools. Multi-sensory writing opportunities (e.g. writing by hand in the sand and modelling clay) were also suggested.

**Books and reading space.** Books and reading space referred to the availability of books and a place for reading. Several students claimed that books offer opportunities to get acquainted with writing, indicating that reading books acts as a gateway to writing. Books should be placed in different places in the classroom. The availability of books was considered essential to providing children with opportunities to explore reading by themselves and with an adult. The children should also be able to reach the books themselves.

Whole, interesting books, magazines, and brochures/flyers are placed on the children's level in different places in the learning environment. (Finland.)

Having plenty of books, children like different things. (Norway)

A book centre – the possibility for books and a place to unwind. This can arouse interest in reading and writing. But children can also see letters and which letters belong to different words. (Sweden)

A few students referred to a designated book centre, where children could read and explore books undisturbed. Available books were described as important artefacts as they can introduce children to writing and its meaning.

### **Writing activities**

Writing activities referred to activities that invited children to explore writing in the physical writing environment. This theme was consequently connected to the writing artefacts previously discussed. The activities mentioned were tied in different ways to children's learning and knowledge development, as they included notions of how and what to learn. The students' expressed intentions with the activities was to motivate the children to explore writing, offer opportunities for developing writing skills, and establish a cheerful atmosphere that emphasises writing as a fun activity. A common idea was that 'practice makes perfect', indicating that the children should be allowed to explore writing without time pressure.

**Play activities.** Play activities referred to adding writing situations to children's play. The students stated that children's play, especially in scenarios where it is natural to write, could favourably include writing. Examples given by the students were labelling treasure maps in treasure hunts, making shopping lists when playing grocery store, and writing menus in restaurants.

I think children should be able to use materials (pens, paper) in spontaneous play, because I think children learn a lot while playing. (Finland)

Participate in the play where writing is a natural part. (Sweden)

Support children's exploration of writing through play-writing. (Norway)

Play activities also included playful interaction and language games. Moreover, the students stressed that they, as preschool teachers, would join the children in the play activities.

**Narrative activities.** Narrative activities referred to different narratives made up and told by both children and adults. Particularly, storytelling was emphasised as a supportive activity with interactions between children and adults. Another example was making up and writing down stories with the children and having them write their own books. Consequently, collaborative writing was considered an important interaction in the preschool environment.

I believe I would use storytelling in preschool and let the children retell through text and pictures. (Finland)

The children can draw cartoons and then write underneath what is happening in the drawing and use their imagination. (Norway)

Collaborative writing situations could include adults writing what the child dictates, a child and an adult making up the content together, and an adult sitting beside the child as she or he writes. There was also one mentioning of the possibility of writing in other languages than the language of instruction.

**Reading activities.** In the sub-theme of reading activities, reading aloud was one of the most prominently described activities between preschool personnel and children. According to the students, reading aloud could promote phonological awareness and demonstrate the connection between speech and writing. Students mentioned that preschool personnel should read what the children have written and hold conversations about their texts, thus accentuating conversations about writing, texts, reading, and language on a meta-level.

I can highlight the words in a book that we read and look at them while we read, but also after reading and look at the shape of the word form (long, short) and sound out phonemes. (Finland)

Read when the child wants to read and is motivated. Ask the children what books they like, possibly different topics; some like cars, others like animals. (Norway)

I think it is extra important with especially books and that you arrange a good structure for reading aloud situations together with the children within the groups. (Sweden)

Other reading activities involved library visits or library personnel bringing books to the preschool. Additionally, children's own interests were prominent regarding reading activities.

### ***The students' views on the importance of the teachers' mediating role***

#### ***Qualities of teacher mediation***

Qualities of teacher mediation referred to different approaches to how the students as preschool teachers would support and mediate early writing. The three sub-themes that emerged were closely interconnected, and they represented different dimensions of teacher mediation.

**Pedagogical and ideological focus.** Pedagogical and ideological focus referred to a meta-level dimension of pedagogical choices the students would make to support early writing. A main characteristic was different aspects of a child-centred approach to children's early writing. Such an approach was considered a beneficial starting point as it utilises children's interests as a pivot point for writing. The students would follow each child's personal development and be attentive to what the children would like to write. Reaching the children within their zone of development was emphasised by discussing differentiation and challenging the children to develop their writing skills further.

I do not want to force them to do anything, but I believe that daily focus on it will make the children interested. Working with invented writing and supporting the children at the level they are. (Norway)

Start with the individual child → what the child is interested in → inspire the child by linking their writing to their interest. (Finland)

The children's own initiatives were stressed in giving them possibilities to choose the materials they want to use. Writing should be on the children's terms, and preschool teachers should encourage children based on children's own experiences as this may increase their motivation for writing.

Overall, students wished to prioritise writing and allow children to explore writing in different ways. The students emphasised helping children to understand the function of writing. Some writing activities were referred to as spontaneous, but students also mentioned planned writing activities.

The important thing would be to arouse an interest in the children in a playful way, not so that the children must learn how to write. (Finland)

It is important to capture the children's interest in the planned activities related to writing. It is important that a preschool teacher is involved and participates in the activity to create more interest. (Sweden)

According to the students, planned writing activities would make writing a natural part of the preschool day. Connecting the writing activities to children's own interests was described as a good starting point. The students also emphasised starting with the letters in the children's names to make writing personal and meaningful. In general, the mere availability of any adult in the preschool was considered a crucial part of a supportive writing environment, because the adult can help in writing situations.

Students mentioned an early start for writing acquisition to prepare children for school. The students stressed that learning to write, shape letters, and hold a pen correctly take different amounts of time for children, and preschool teachers need to allow for and embrace that variation. Altogether, pedagogical and ideological focus emphasised preschool teachers as attentive to children's initiatives, interests, and experiences when supporting their early writing.

***Teachers as role models.*** Teachers as role models referred to a dimension regarding how the students perceive their roles as future preschool teachers when supporting early writing. Generally, they viewed themselves as important writing role models, who should be encouraging, but somewhat passive, rather than actively instructive and teaching writing. The students stated that children need an adult to copy, indicating that teachers need to demonstrate how to write, why it is important to learn to write, and what writing is good for. This indicated that when preschool teachers actually write in front of the children while at work, they contribute to the children's access to a text culture. Consequently, the students stated that teachers need to integrate writing in their daily practice as a role model for the children.

Give the children experiences that they would want to write about. Support the children and value their writings. Be a writing role model. (Norway)

Children's literacy learning starts before they start to pre-write or write themselves. They look at us as adults to see how we do it and make up their own identity with the written word. (Sweden)

The students emphasised that teachers could support writing by using a rich vocabulary, having a positive attitude towards writing, and preferably, enjoying writing themselves. Overall, the students expressed the importance of the teacher's role in mediating a writing culture and being a writing role model for the children.

**Encouragement and reinforcement.** Encouragement and reinforcement referred to a procedural dimension in terms of being available for interaction and encouragement during writing situations. Encouragement often meant having a preschool teacher present to the children.

If I, as a preschool teacher, sit down at a station and start writing a little while simultaneously talking with the children close by or at the table, I think it will raise the children's interest and desire to write. (Sweden)

The students emphasised positive reinforcement with the intention to strengthen children's confidence in themselves as writing individuals. They would encourage children to write and read in the preschool and acknowledge the slightest progress in children's writing development. They emphasised showing interest in the children's produced texts and giving feedback, such as indicating that their writing is important and valuable.

Give positive feedback, acknowledge what the children have done and take some time to talk with each child. (Norway).

The students would encourage and reinforce early writing by being responsive, patient, and not put pressure on the children. Praise was also considered a way to support children's writing. Additionally, support and encouragement meant that the students would not point out errors and misspellings in children's text. They would provide advice and guidance to help the children become better writers.

Write together with the child and show that children's own writing is not wrong. Make writing exciting. (Norway).

Overall, the end-goal of encouragement and reinforcement was to make writing enjoyable, as the students considered the joy of writing as crucial for the desire to explore writing and crack the alphabetic code.

## Discussion

In this study of preschool student teachers' views on how early writing should be supported in preschool, two research questions were addressed. The first question concerned *the organisation of a writing-inviting environment*. The students offered rich, informed, and concrete suggestions that reflected insights into the relevance of the physical environment for early writing, for example, print resources, writing artefacts, writing and reading spaces, and writing activities. The richness of these responses is striking and suggests a keen perceptiveness of the potentialities of a nuanced and writing-inviting physical context. The second question concerned *teacher mediation* of early writing, where three dimensions were highlighted: (a) a child-centred pedagogy through writing activities based on the child's interest, initiative, daily life experiences, and motivation; (b) the teacher as a role model, who demonstrates how writing is carried out,

encourages the child's writing attempts, and praises written products without instructing writing; and (c) a mediation process characterised by encouragement, praise, and responsiveness without making corrections in order to strengthen the child's self-confidence.

The students offered a range of concrete suggestions about the preschool environment. These findings corroborate with previous research on professional knowledge associated with preschool teachers (Gerde, Goetsch, and Bingham 2016), qualities of writing-inviting environments (Korkeamäki and Dreher 2000), and the importance of incorporating writing tools in literacy learning (Mellgren and Margrain 2015; Neuman and Roskos 1997). In contrast, the students' suggestions about teacher mediation were not, however, concrete and detailed. Only in exceptional cases did their responses contain specific references to mediation at a concrete level (see also Cunningham et al. 2009). In socio-cultural theory, teacher mediation and the tools used during learning situations are seen as the main mechanisms of learning. However, these more specific and concrete aspects of mediation, including topics related to knowledge of language, reading, and writing, were not generally reflected in the students' responses. With a few exceptions, such as 'start with the child's name' and 'shape and form letters', practical approaches were rarely mentioned when answering the question: 'How would you support children's writing?' One possible explanation could be a lack of disciplinary knowledge, or maybe also of a professional language, among preschool teachers regarding how to promote early literacy (Cunningham, Zibulsky, and Callahan 2009; Gerde, Wright, and Bingham 2019).

The students' views reflect a teacher mediation strategy that encompasses a child-centred focus, teacher modelling, and encouragement, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities most readily pertain to children who 'drive their own development' via spontaneous writing supported by teacher encouragement and praise. However, there is a risk that children will miss out on learning situations if key activities are solely based on children's initiatives. Implicitly evident in the students' responses is a holistic view of learning, emphasising play as central. This highlights the importance of connecting the writing activities to play activities (Pramling et al. 2019), which is also evident in previous studies (Gjems, Grøgaard, and Tvedten 2016; Hvit 2015). Yet play-based pedagogy could even be a harmful approach if teachers lack knowledge about guiding the playing and learning processes forward (cf. Vygotsky 1978). As such, we propose a move beyond children's initiatives to adopt a pedagogical approach that invites children to participate in writing activities. All children need support from teachers who mediate writing activities in relation to children's ongoing development to explore writing further. Despite this rather obvious need for teacher support, previous research (Bingham et al. 2018; Cunningham, Zibulsky, and Callahan 2009; Gerde, Wright, and Bingham 2019; Norling 2014) has shown that some preschool teachers rarely tend to support early writing in practice. Explanations for this can possibly be due to limitations of preschool teachers' teaching skills because writing skills are seen as the school's responsibility or because active mediation does not accord with their overarching educational ideology.

Against this backdrop, one may wonder whether the rather general suggestions offered by the students when asked what can the teacher do to support early writing (RQ2) as compared to how can the teacher organise the physical environment (RQ1) reflect differences in the students' mastery of the two domains of knowledge (mediation and physical environment). One may suspect that knowing *what* artefacts to include in

the physical environment draws on different types of knowledge from knowing *how to* mediate a child's writing at the appropriate level of writing development.

### **Limitations**

We recognise some limitations of this study. First, the small sample size prevents us from drawing broad conclusions. These results are not representative of all Nordic countries and preschool student teachers. On the other hand, qualitative data aim to be meaningful, recognisable, and descriptive of the phenomena (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). All participants had recently attended lectures about children's early writing in their bachelor's programmes and participated in preservice training. Arguably, they could therefore be a significantly updated sample, but generalising conclusions of findings should still be done carefully. Second, using a self-report methodology like the questionnaire, we obtained information about the respondents' ideas about their own behaviour. This information might be different if we had observed the participants in real-life situations. Additionally, the variation between the digital and the hand-written questionnaires presumably affected the length of the answers given.

### **Conclusions and implications**

Overall, the preschool student teachers' views seem to be strongly underpinned by the traditional Nordic holistic perspective of children's learning, in which the child's own initiative is typically the pivot point of activities and pedagogical content. Furthermore, the students describe an environment that invites the children to participate in writing, with themselves as role models, actively encouraging children to explore writing. There were less explicit theoretical reasons for why the students would support the children the way they proposed. This finding suggests that the question of *why* to support early writing needs to be more comprehensively developed in the higher education system to strengthen professional development and advance more robust knowledge about supporting early writing.

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