Introduction to the Special Issue on writing research in Scandinavia

Gustaf B. Skara\textsuperscript{a}, Kristine Kabel\textsuperscript{b}, Caroline Liberg\textsuperscript{c}, and Jesper Bremholm\textsuperscript{d}

Recent decades have seen a shift regarding ideas of and approaches to literacy. One example is that the individual-psychological perspective focusing primarily on specific writing skills that used to be predominant has been extended and complemented by functional, social semiotic, and sociocultural perspectives where the interaction between the individual’s use of language resources and the social, cultural, and historical contexts is in focus (e.g., Beach et al., 2016). Furthermore, issues of writing instruction and research have, in recent years, received far more attention than before, which can be noted by the publication of handbooks of writing research (MacArthur et al., 2016), writing development (Beard et al., 2009), writing instruction (Graham et al., 2019), and reviews of writing research (Juzwik et al., 2006).

This increased attention to writing also applies in the three neighbouring countries that constitute Scandinavia: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (see Bremholm et al., 2022). Two decades ago, Igland and Ongstad (2002, pp. 339–340), in a special issue of Written Communication, presented Norwegian writing research and noted that international readers may find ‘the relationship between theoretical and empirical aspects in [the included] articles unfamiliar and provocative’. They suspected this because of the
common tendency of several Norwegian research papers to be ‘abductive’, because empirical studies were used to ‘deliberate on the usefulness and value of theoretical frameworks and their major concepts’. According to Igland and Ongstad, the ‘small scaled and modest’ Norwegian field of writing research was on its way to establish a ‘research genre’ with features uncommon to more ‘traditional’ and ‘essentializing’ empirical research. In sum, the editors described Norwegian writing research as inspired by international trends – especially from English-speaking countries – while developing its own niche of research.

Twenty years later, the situation in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia has changed. Scandinavian researchers to a greater extent publish in English and in international journals, and thereby share knowledge with a broader audience. Another change occurred on an inter-individual level: Scandinavian researchers collaborate with each other and with colleagues around the world. However, much research is still published in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, and some of the trends Igland and Ongstad (2002) noted have been reinforced rather than weakened. It is, for example, still common for Scandinavian writing researchers to shed light on theoretical frameworks and major concepts through the lens of empirical studies. Against this backdrop, we wanted to introduce Scandinavian writing research of today to an international audience and to provide insights into new results and ongoing Scandinavian research projects of general relevance and interest beyond its originating context.

Articles Included

The opening article is a review of primary and secondary school Scandinavian writing research between 2010 and 2020, and as such it is related to the backdrop sketched above. The review identifies three major themes characterising recent Scandinavian writing research: writing instruction, writing assessment, and students’ texts. One prominent finding in the review is that the approaches used build on a broadened view of writing, particularly inspired by sociocultural and social semiotic theory, which indicates that Scandinavian writing research also reflects the broadening of perspectives on writing and writing development mentioned above. Another important finding is that a majority of the included research is comprised of exploratory and small-scale studies focusing primarily on general aspects of writing or on writing as part of the L1 subject (language arts/first language education). Studies of writing in other subject areas also exist, but they are less frequent.

In addition to this review, the special issue includes eight articles which complement the image of a more expanded landscape outlined in the
The articles report from both small and large-scale studies, and they all refer to primary school. We argue, however, that the articles are relevant not only for teachers and researchers specialised within this stage of schooling, but also for teachers and researchers interested in later stages, as they present valuable knowledge important for understanding trajectories and transitions throughout the educational years – from the first encounter with writing in school to writing in college and tertiary educational contexts. Furthermore, the research presented in the articles also contributes to a metalanguage that is not tied to specific educational levels. This metalanguage might serve as a useful tool for teachers when talking to their students about their writing and writing development, and when assessing their students’ progress, regardless of the students’ age.

The eight articles in this special issue are grouped into three sections: young students’ writing development, teachers’ views on students’ writing, and assessment of elementary students’ writing.

The first section includes four articles. The first three articles all stem from the same large-scale research project and build on one another. In the first article: ‘A framework for identifying early writing development’, Kabel, Bremholm, and Bundsgaard present a novel framework for identifying young students’ writing development in the first years of primary school (age 6–8 years). This framework is based on both formal and functional linguistic approaches in order to examine the first steps into ways of communicating through writing in school. It is developed through a theory-and data-driven process.

In ‘Validating scales for early writing development’ (Bundsgaard, Kabel, & Bremholm), the Kabel et al. framework lays the ground for an empirical validation of scales describing writing development. Drawing on a large sample of student texts (N = 803), the authors employ Rasch modeling to establish boundaries between levels of writing development within four dimensions: text construction, sentence construction, verbals, and modifiers. The articles also offer an introduction to Rasch modelling, and an exciting invitation for other researchers to use the data set, which is available online, to remodel the data using alternative techniques.

The third article, ‘Proficiency scales for early writing development’, (Bremholm, Bundsgaard, & Kabel) is an in-depth presentation of the characteristics of the levels established in Bundsgaard et al., as well as an exploration of the expected trajectories of students in the first grades in Denmark. Together the three articles provide valuable knowledge not only about the writing development of Danish students from a linguistic perspective, but also in terms of methodological advancement. Other researchers may find the framework and the levels suitable in other contexts or may draw upon...
the methodological approach to establish their own frameworks, validation procedures, and level descriptions.

In the last article of the section about young students’ writing development ‘Audience awareness in elementary school students’ texts: Variations within and between grades 1–3’, Skar, Aasen, Kvistad, and Johansen use a cross-sectional design to investigate signs of audience awareness in a sample of 90 texts written by students aged 6–8. The study shows how young students use a variety of rhetorical moves. Hereby, it provides insights about how to understand students’ capacity to address an audience already in the early stages of their writing development.

Two articles are included in the section regarding teachers’ views on students’ writing. In the first article, ‘Teachers’ talk about young students’ writing of narrative and informational texts’, Liberg, Folkeryd, af Geijerstam, and Nordlund explore in what manner early primary school teachers change their way of talking about students’ school texts (age 7–9) after taking part in four professional development workshops. Building on a framework rooted in systemic functional linguistics, the study shows how the participating teachers broadened their repertoires and, based on this finding, it concludes by suggesting a useful functional metalanguage for teachers in the writing classroom.

In the second article within this section, ‘Teachers’ talk about giving feedback to young text writers, and about giving feedback on handwritten and typed texts’, Rønneberg and Nilsen present a study of how four primary teachers talk about the feedback they give to young students’ texts written by hand or typed on computer. The teachers report that they give oral feedback with a positive focus. Moreover, it is found that the teachers focus on local aspects of the text regardless of the medium in which the text is written.

The last section includes two articles that examine different aspects of the assessment of elementary students’ writing. In the first article, ‘Linguistically based scales for assessment of young students’ writing’, af Geijerstam, Folkeryd, and Liberg report on a study where they assessed 100 elementary students’ texts in four different genres using both holistic assessment (comparative judgment) and criteria-based assessment. The criteria-based approach is anchored in a functional view of language and was developed by the authors of the article. By comparing the assessments, the study examines the linguistic traits of texts at different quality levels and of texts assessed differently using the two approaches.

In the second article in this section, ‘Identifying texts in the warning zone: Empirical foundation for assessment for change in elementary school writing instruction’, Skar, Kvistad, Johansen, Rijlaarsdam, and Aasen direct their attention to young students at risk of developing insufficient writing
skills. The article is based on a study aimed at developing a screening tool for teachers in grades 1–3 to identify students whose writing proficiency is in the ‘Warning Zone’. Drawing on a representative sample of student texts and combining a benchmarking approach and a questionnaire involving 14 experts in writing, the article determines cut-off scores for texts in the Warning Zone at each grade and identifies growth patterns related to the Warning Zone for eight text quality aspects across the three grades. In addition, using examples of student texts, the article presents different text profiles of student texts in the Warning Zone, thus indicating the variation of texts falling in the Warning Zone.

In sum, the articles included in this special issue both present novel insights into young students’ writing, and a snapshot of current Scandinavian writing research. We are proud to say that they also contribute with needed knowledge to the globally growing field of research on writing. We are grateful to the colleagues around the globe who have served as peer reviewers and helped the authors to raise the quality of the articles. We would also like to express our gratitude to the lead editor of Writing & Pedagogy, Jill Jeffery, for supporting our editorial work with valuable assistance and advice.

References


