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Drawing in Early Literacy Instruction: How Teachers Position Drawing in Contemporary Swedish Preschool Class

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Abstract
This study examines multimodality in early literacy instruction, focusing on the role of drawing in the Swedish preschool class (ages 5–6). Drawing is conceptualized as a communicative resource within classroom practice, explored through interviews with teachers, to understand how drawing is enacted and valued in this setting. While drawing is deeply integrated in preschool (Änggård, 2005), its position in early primary education remains less defined. Addressing a limited research field and current policy reforms shaping literacy instruction in Sweden, the study identifies three dimensions of drawing: (1) the pedagogical width, that is, drawing's pervasive presence across instructional practice; (2) the bridge-building function; and (3) the contradictory positioning as both intrinsically valuable and interlinked with other modes, primarily alphabetic writing.

Keywords: *drawing; multimodality; early literacy instruction; Swedish preschool class*

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Introduction

This article examines the role of drawing as a multimodal resource in early literacy instruction within the Swedish preschool class, foregrounding teachers' perspectives on its instructional implementation and pedagogical values. The study is situated within a broader landscape of ongoing policy reforms, including the planned reconfiguration of the Swedish preschool class into a formal Year 1 (Prop. 2024/25:143, 2024; Swedish Ministry of Education, 2021). At the same time, the national curriculum for primary education is becoming increasingly standardized (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2025), in parallel with a reform of teacher education (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2024). The forthcoming introduction of a ten-year compulsory schooling structure, scheduled for implementation in autumn 2028, similarly signals tighter standardization and stricter qualification requirements for

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teachers. Together, these reforms risk constraining literacy instruction by privileging formal and technical competencies over broader, more holistic approaches to early language and literacy development.

As part of such holistic approaches to early literacy, multimodality, and particularly the role of drawing, emerges as a critical area of inquiry in early educational contexts. Yet this research field remains relatively marginal, underscoring the need for closer examination of how drawing operates as a communicative and meaning-making resource in the early years. Existing studies indicate that drawing has received considerably less attention in classroom practice than writing (Adoniou, 2013; Björk et al., 2025), despite scholars emphasizing its educational significance. Drawing has been described as a central literacy practice through which children communicate and engage in meaning-making, and as a support in their emerging writing development (e.g., Adoniou, 2013; Friedrich et al., 2021; Hopperstad, 2010; Rowe & Wilson, 2015). Despite these insights, teaching practices in the Swedish preschool class have been shown to foreground formal skill development, phonics, letter recognition, and handwriting – reflecting a broader movement toward the scholarization of early education (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Aminoff, 2021; Skoog, 2012).

The present study engages with a growing body of research that recognizes drawing as a significant mode of meaning-making and communication in early childhood education and seeks to advance understanding of how drawing can enrich early literacy instruction. Specifically, this study investigates preschool class teachers' conceptualizations of drawing as a mode within the broader landscape of literacy teaching and development. The purpose is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how drawing is perceived and integrated into early writing pedagogy, including the roles, values, and pedagogical considerations associated with its uses. To address this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do preschool class teachers describe the integration of drawing within early literacy instruction?

RQ2. How do preschool class teachers articulate the potential of drawing in these early literacy settings?

The article situates the study within its educational context by outlining the preschool class's current structure and anticipated reforms. It then reviews research on drawing and multimodality in early childhood education, presents the guiding theoretical framework, describes data collection and analysis, and concludes with results and discussion.

The first year of schooling in Sweden: Current form and pending reforms

The preschool class was established in Sweden in 1998 and became compulsory for all six-year-olds in 2018. Since its introduction, it has occupied a liminal position between preschool and compulsory school, drawing on two partly divergent educational

traditions. One of these is a social-pedagogical orientation emphasizing play, relationships, interaction, and the integration of education and care, seeing the children as agents of their own learning. This approach has been particularly emphasized in the Nordic countries and in a number of Central European countries. The academic school tradition or early education approach, on the other hand, highlights preparation for primary education through a stronger focus on skills, performance, curriculum, and emergent literacy and numeracy (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016, 2019; Broström, 2017).

The reform introducing ten years of compulsory schooling can be interpreted as a consequence of the preschool class occupying what Ackesjö and Persson (2019) characterize as a liminal, uncertain, and ambiguous position since its introduction. As the revised Swedish curriculum has yet to be published, the regulatory framework for this new first year remains unsettled, though government reports (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2021, 2025) indicate a reinforced emphasis on technical skills, particularly in relation to reading and writing, a so-called phonics-first orientation (cf. Bradbury & Wyse, 2025). The upcoming structural changes have also generated considerable debate regarding teacher qualification requirements. Preschool teachers who currently meet the qualification requirements for teaching the preschool class will no longer fulfil these criteria under the revised school structure. Highlighting this context underscores the importance of documenting the participating teachers' experiences and understandings of drawing within classroom activities.

Research on multimodality and drawing in early literacy instruction

The research field addressing multimodal compositions in various school settings is large, as shown in several comprehensive reviews and empirical studies spanning multiple age groups, subjects, and theoretical frameworks (e.g., Bezemer & Kress, 2016; Jewitt, 2008; Vasudevan et al., 2010). However, research that addresses drawing as a distinct phenomenon remains relatively scarce (e.g., Latham & Ewing, 2018). This calls for more systematic and nuanced investigations into how drawing functions as a communicative and meaning-making resource, particularly within early childhood education. In Änggård's study (2005), preschool children's drawing emerges as a central component of their peer cultures: through drawing, they construct meaning, relationships, and gender identities in collective, dialogic processes that are often closely intertwined with play. In the natural sciences context, drawings have been more thoroughly studied for their potential to enhance conceptual understanding, reflecting the established role of models and visual representations in communicating natural scientific ideas (e.g., Westlund, 2022).

When drawing is addressed in literacy research, it is typically framed as an educational resource linked to emergent writing and meaning-making, often positioned as a foundational stage in writing development (Christianakis, 2011; Dyson, 1997; McKenzie & Veresov, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978) or as a precursor to writing (Baghban, 2007). Kress (1997) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that drawing is often

framed as a form of self-expression linked to children's cognitive and emotional development rather than as a communicative act, a dimension they advocate should be foregrounded. Building on this, Björk (2025) advances a view of drawing as a dialogic, meaning-making, and communicative mode, extending multimodal understandings of literacy. Parallel to these theoretical perspectives, a body of empirical research emphasizes the pedagogical value of drawing. Friedrich et al. (2021) demonstrate that drawing supports children's understanding of sign systems, thereby possibly easing their transition to written language (cf. Rowe & Wilson, 2015). Hopperstad (2010) defines drawing as a distinctive form of literacy, an ability to convey meaning through visual and spatial modes, often in combination with other semiotic resources. Similarly, Adoniou (2013) found that drawing before writing enhanced children's production of informational texts, particularly among multilingual learners, while Mackenzie (2011) reported that teaching approaches prioritizing drawing fostered both more complex written texts and more positive learner attitudes.

In the Swedish context, research shows that drawing is frequently present as a classroom activity in the preschool class but rarely addressed as an explicit object of literacy instruction or as a distinct object of inquiry in research. Studies by Aminoff (2021) and Skoog (2012) indicate that teaching in the preschool class tends to focus on formal skills related to phoneme-grapheme correspondence, letter recognition, and technical writing skills. Andersson et al. (2019) interviewed 12 preschool class teachers to examine perspectives on early writing instruction. Teachers distinguished between individual and group writing activities, and adopted two pedagogical orientations: one prioritizing creative, functional writing, and another emphasizing technical skills such as letter formation and phonological awareness. These findings underscore persistent ambiguity regarding balancing structured skill-based instruction with fostering intrinsic motivation, reflecting broader debates in early literacy education. Although drawings were not a primary focus, they appeared as integral to writing activities, yet under-theorized, suggesting an overlooked role in both practice and research. Findings from Andersson's (2017) study, based on qualitative data from three focus group interviews with 18 preschool class teachers, show how the teachers describe drawing as a compensatory resource, enabling children to communicate when letter writing is not yet possible, and as an alternative to written tasks alongside oral presentations. The study also highlights integrated practices, such as writing workshops where children combine writing and illustrations. A key challenge identified is balancing free play, guided play, and structured learning, particularly for children less inclined toward literacy activities (Andersson, 2017, p. 106).

Aminoff (2021) explores written language activities in preschool class and Grade 1, focusing on the transition between these stages. The study shows that teachers often separate form, function, and content, prioritizing technical skills through activities categorized as code-cracking, read-aloud practices, and writing as craft. Such approaches, Aminoff argues, underutilize children's prior experiences, limiting meaningful engagement. While multimodality is not central, drawings occasionally appear,

for instance, as illustrations accompanying text (p. 152). Similarly, Norrman (2024) examines functional writing instruction in Grades 1–3, noting that drawings, dramatization, and oral scaffolding support communication by enhancing meaning, narrative structure, and pupils confidence. Further, Borgfeldt (2017) addresses assessment challenges in multimodal text work with plurilingual Grade 3 learners, finding that children frequently choose drawing, suggesting its complementary role to writing (p. 130). Current research thus suggests that although drawing and multimodality are prevalent in early years classrooms, they remain peripheral in scholarly inquiry and pedagogical reflections, particularly in Sweden's preschool class.

Theoretical considerations

The study is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and multimodal approaches to meaning-making (Kress, 2003, 2010). These perspectives, widely applied in Nordic educational research on writing and multimodal text production, provide a foundation for examining how meaning is constituted through multiple communicative resources. From a social semiotic standpoint, language is conceived as a socially situated resource for meaning-making rather than as a fixed system of rules. Texts are thus viewed as products of semiotic choices made by individuals to accomplish communicative purposes within specific contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Building on these premises, the study adopts a social semiotic multimodal framework (cf. Björk, 2025; Björk et al., 2025) to explore how meaning-making unfolds across modes such as drawing, image, and writing. Each mode is understood to carry distinct semiotic affordances, potentials for expressing meaning that interact intermodally within communicative acts (Kress, 2003). Finally, the study draws on a social constructivist orientation, viewing teachers' talk as a central site where pedagogical meanings are negotiated and co-constructed. Teachers' conceptual negotiations are thus understood not merely as reflections of individual cognition but as discursive processes that shape the conditions for teaching and learning (Bryman, 2016).

Data collection and participants

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design, aiming to explore preschool class teachers' conceptualizations of drawing as instructional practice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers in preschool class. The sole inclusion criterion for teachers to participate was active employment as a preschool class teacher. Recruitment was conducted through contact with school principals using a convenience sampling approach, in two small towns and one large city located in southern and northern Sweden. The participating schools represented a range of socioeconomic contexts, including rural schools, schools situated

in suburban areas of larger cities, and schools located in smaller urban areas. The participating teachers and their pseudonyms are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participating teachers, school, years of experience, and educational background

ID	School	Years of experience	Educational background
Olle	A	6	Preschool teacher education
Anna	B	37 (26 in preschool class)	Preschool teacher education
Annika	B	12	After school teacher education (extra teacher training *"lärarlyftet"*)
Kalle	C	28	Teacher education
Solveig	C	32 (17 in preschool class)	Preschool teacher education
Hanna	D	26	Preschool teacher education
Jenny	D	7	Teacher education
Marianne	D	22	Preschool teacher education
Camilla	D	37 (18 in preschool class)	Teacher education
Ida	D	23	After school teacher education (extra teacher training *"lärarlyftet"*)
Bodil	E	17	Preschool teacher education
Bonnie	E	22	Preschool teacher education
Bea	E	21	Preschool teacher education
Nina	F	40 (13 in preschool class)	Preschool teacher education
Pia	G	17 (8 in preschool class)	Teacher education
Petra	G	20	Teacher education

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, either via Zoom or at the participants' respective workplaces. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes. An interview guide was employed to ensure consistency across sessions; it comprised six demographic questions and ten substantive questions addressing participants' understanding of multimodality and drawing, as well as their experiences of and reflections on multimodal teaching practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim using the transcription software Amberscript.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the Swedish Research Council (2017). Participants were initially informed about the purpose of the project and asked to provide their informed consent to participate. Prior to each interview, the ethical principles governing research participation were repeated, and participants were again asked to confirm their consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, without any negative consequences. All personal data were managed in compliance with the General Data

Protection Regulation (GDPR) and securely stored on GDPR-compliant servers at Mälardalen University. No ethically sensitive data were collected as part of this research. All data were fully anonymized prior to analysis to ensure that no individual participant could be identified.

Analytical procedure

We conceptualize drawing both as a *process*: the act of drawing (*rita* or *teckna*), and as a *product*: a drawing (*teckning*). In this sense, drawing is understood as an embodied, material, and representational practice that involves the movement of the hand and a drawing tool, typically a pencil or a brush, on a surface. The process may occur in either analog or digital form, though in the present study, drawing predominantly refers to analog practices. This conceptualization deliberately delineates the boundaries of what constitutes drawing in the empirical data. Activities such as collage-making or other picture-related instructional practices are therefore excluded from this definition. By specifying these boundaries, we aim to maintain conceptual precision and analytical coherence throughout the analysis.

The analytical procedure followed the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors independently read and coded the interview transcripts, focusing on segments containing references to *drawing/painting* (*rita, teckna, måla*) and *pictures* (*bild*) when referenced as drawn pictures. The transcripts were systematically examined for all comments including these terms. All relevant comments were then extracted into a separate document and coded, with each researcher moving iteratively between the selected comments and the original transcripts to ensure contextual accuracy. Each researcher coded the comments independently, after which a collaborative session with the researchers was conducted to compare, discuss, and refine the individual analyses. During this workshop, discrepancies and ambiguities in coding were critically examined, negotiated, and resolved through consensus to enhance the credibility and consistency of the analysis. After this, the transcripts were reread to identify any additional comments related to drawing that might not have been captured in the initial search, and to ensure alignment between the formulated codes and teachers' expressed meanings in the interviews. Initial codes were generated inductively, with the intention to capture salient patterns and meanings across participants' accounts. Specifically, this process initially involved identifying narrowly defined meaning-bearing codes closely linked to the interview statements. The final codes were then thematized, clustered into subthemes, and consolidated into broader themes, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates this analytical process with examples from the initial coding of interview statements and identified subthemes, and their consolidation under one of the broader themes (perceived values of drawing). While efforts were made to achieve coherence across coders, some variations in interpretation remained. These instances of interpretive uncertainty were acknowledged and are to some extent discussed

further in the Results section as part of showing analytical transparency. All cited material originally in Swedish has been translated into English by the researchers.

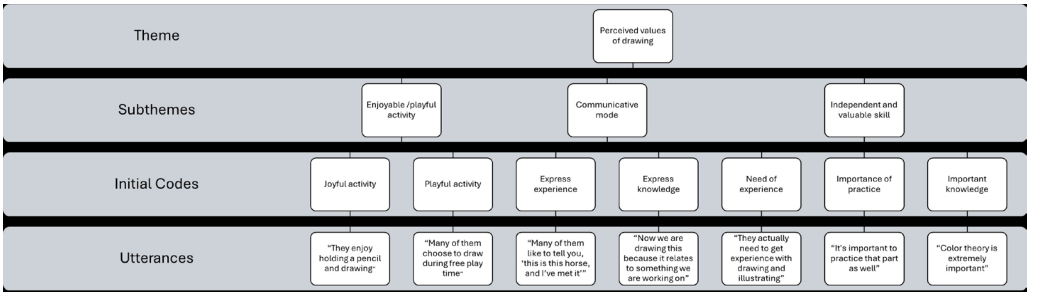

Figure 1. Illustration of the analytical process.

Results

The Results section is divided into five subsections. The first three, examining drawing as a form of governance and as an assessment practice, respond to RQ1. The subsequent subsections, which explore the values attributed to drawing, drawing in relation to alphabetic writing, and its pedagogical potential, address RQ2. The themes, with descriptions and subthemes identified in the data, are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Themes identified in the data, with descriptions and subthemes

Themes	**Description**	**Subthemes**
Drawing as an instructional activity	Comments where teachers talk about the extent of or the content of teacher and learner drawing in instruction	Teacher activity Learner activity
Drawing as a form of governance	Comments where drawing is conceptualized as a more or less controlled activity	Freedom Control
Drawing as assessment	Comments where teachers relate drawing to assessment practices	Evidence for learning specific content Ambivalent in relation to creative expression
Values of drawing	Comments relating to perceived intrinsic values ascribed to drawing	Enjoyable/playful activity Communicative mode Independent and valuable skill
Drawing in relation to alphabetic writing	Comments that conceptualize drawing in relation to alphabetic writing	Complementary to writing Prewriting activity Subordinate to writing
Pedagogical potential of drawing	Comments relating to pedagogical functions of drawing in early literacy instruction	Starting point Participation Differentiation Scaffold

Drawing as instructional activity

Drawing is consistently identified as the most frequently employed modality within preschool class contexts, a pattern evidenced by recurrent formulations such as "we do draw a lot" (Bea). Most teachers (15/16) explicitly report that drawing constitutes the most frequently employed modality alongside alphabetic writing, primarily as a *learner activity*. The accounts of instruction, present in all teachers' accounts, typically take the form of descriptions of actions, content, or materials associated with such practices. The subject or content of drawing is also evident in these accounts. One such topic concerns genre, mostly in relation to drawing and writing narratives. Most teachers (14/16) in the dataset also discuss drawing as a *teacher activity*, understood here as drawing performed by the teacher during lessons. Bea notes that she frequently draws on the board. She considers alternatives such as using prepared images on a computer but her purpose in drawing is to "catch the pupils", emphasizing instructional drawing in terms of capturing attention. Similarly, Nina observes that drawing is familiar and accessible to children: "[drawings] are symbolizing easily for these children" (Nina). Kalle underscores its value for visualization and Ida identifies drawing as one of several instructional strategies, alongside reading aloud, verbal explanation, and bodily movement. Olle highlights his instructional drawing as a means of reinforcement.

Drawing as a form of governance

A central analytical theme concerns drawing as a form of governance, articulated through the interrelated subthemes of drawing as *freedom* and drawing as *control.* Rather than representing discrete categories, these subthemes constitute a continuum that captures the dual governing functions of drawing within the pedagogical context. This continuum reflects the preschool class's dual position between social-pedagogical traditions and school-oriented academic expectations (cf. Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Broström, 2017). Drawing as an activity may amplify such a duality because it can be associated with play-based and creative practices, while simultaneously, as apparent in this study, being mobilized for instructional purposes within the educational setting. The dimension of drawing as free play is mentioned by Nina when she comments that many children "choose to sit down and draw" during these free play sessions that she says are part of the preschool class. Further, Camilla, for instance, refers to sessions of the school day labelled "free choice", concluding that, in relation to these free sessions, "a lot of children that we have now like to create, or I mean to draw" (Camilla). Further, Hanna reflects on the tension between free play and formal instruction. Drawing, she states, can offer a more manageable context for learners, particularly when conventional tasks such as writing or forming letters present challenges. She suggests that when young learners struggle to produce written text, drawing may serve as an alternative mode of engagement in school assignments:

> There's a right and a wrong here. In a way, that's true. But it's more about: if you can't do it [in writing], then draw [it]. (Hanna)

Olle also highlights the coexistence of guidance and openness within the same activity, specifically in relation to drawing:

> It could be, for example, drawing a shopping list. We had work stations the other day. We worked with the letter M. One station involved them painting monsters with oil pastels. It's a guided activity where they are given a task. But how do you approach it? It's as broad as it can be. They are given complete freedom. So that's what I mean when I say it can be both. (Olle)

Olle's comment illustrates the hybrid nature of many preschool class practices, where structured goals coexist with opportunities for creative expression and communicative intentions, here in terms of drawing. Importantly, teachers do not adopt fixed positions within the continuum of freedom and control, but rather reflect on its presence and on its possible implications. These reflections suggest that conceptualizations of drawing as a modality in the preschool class are confined within the broader institutional negotiation between social-pedagogical and more strict and controlled academic discourses.

Drawing in assessment

Teachers articulate two distinct positions regarding drawing in relation to assessment. Firstly, drawing is positioned as a communicative resource that enables children to demonstrate understanding of content that might otherwise remain inaccessible. In this sense, drawing serves as *evidence of learning specific content*, functioning as an alternative mode of representation within assessment practices. Secondly, teachers express ambivalence toward evaluating drawings, reflecting concerns about the legitimacy of judging or assessing creative or aesthetic qualities, that is, drawing as *ambivalent in relation to creative expression*. This tension seems to result in a continued prioritization of alphabetic writing as the primary basis of formal evaluation, even when drawings are acknowledged as meaningful contributions. These dual positions reveal an underlying hierarchy of modes, where drawing is recognized for its pedagogical utility yet remains marginal in the formal assessment discourse. The ambivalence is expressed in the following citation of Bea:

> I try not to be like "wow, you're really good at drawing", but that's where I end up. Like all about the achievement. "This is good, but try to use [lower case] letters instead. That's it." (Bea)

Nina, on the other hand, emphasizes drawing as a site for positive feedback, framing her comments in ways that affirm the child's effort and interpretive thinking (e.g., "I see that you are thinking in this way with this cat"). In contrast, Bonnie conceptualizes drawing as a way to demonstrate understanding, focusing on its capacity to indicate whether the child has grasped the intended content of a specific assignment:

> For example, I want them to write a fairy tale with a beginning, a middle, and an end. For example, I can comment on whether they have written the story and perhaps used words or drawn pictures, and then I can give them feedback. (Bonnie)

This distinction of drawing in assessment practices illustrates two evaluative logics: one oriented toward encouragement and engagement, and the other toward verification of learning outcomes. Drawing is also positioned at the intersection of communication and creation, shaping teachers' perspectives on assessment.

In summary, drawing emerges as a frequent and integral activity within the preschool class. The dataset contains numerous reflections and descriptions of instructional practice, which predominantly focus on children's engagement with drawing, but also include accounts of teachers' own use of drawing as an instructional mode, and the role of drawing in assessment practice. Drawing is a highly present activity, often associated with familiarity and free play. However, all participating teachers also articulate its instructional value, citing diverse rationales such as getting attention, content reinforcement, and multimodal representation.

Perceived values of drawing

This theme refers to the perceived intrinsic values or significance ascribed to drawing in relation to literacy teaching and can be understood as reflecting three primary orientations. Firstly, drawing is highlighted as an *enjoyable, playful activity* through which children articulate ideas and explore creativity. It is noteworthy that some teachers also reflect on contrasting experiences, observing that some children appear to derive little enjoyment from drawing or perceive themselves as lacking the requisite skill. Nevertheless, the teachers' accounts predominantly emphasize drawing as an activity associated with joy and engagement. Several teachers describe how some children spontaneously choose to draw during "free play", indicating that it is something they both enjoy and need. Solveig, for example, says that "Then they enjoy school, and they enjoy holding a pencil and drawing". Hanna emphasizes the value of creating their own writing and drawing books as part of free-form activities, concluding that this "seems to bring out more engagement and creativity".

Secondly, the dataset also encompasses statements that articulate the value of drawing as a *communicative mode*. Although this aspect is highlighted by only a few teachers (3/16), it is noteworthy. Bodil, for example, describes how drawing enables children to communicate their ideas and experiences: "Well, many of them do have a purpose behind it and like to tell you, this is this horse. And I've met it. And it's doing this in this picture, and so on." Nina also highlights how drawing is sometimes used as the sole mode of expression: "They want to communicate something through this, so it can be guided. I may have decided that now we are drawing this because it relates to something we are working on." In this way, Nina illustrates how drawing can serve as the primary mode of expression.

Thirdly, the interview data also reveal an appreciation of drawing as *an independent and valuable skill*. Several teachers underscore drawing in this way as a foundational competence, particularly in fostering the development of visual literacy. Kalle, for example, points out that "color theory is extremely important", and Anna more generally highlights the importance of visual illustrations:

> But I think it's important to practice that part as well, and not just focus on writing. They actually need to get experience with drawing and illustrating, so they can express ideas visually, even in a simple way. (Anna)

Olle specifically highlights drawing skills as a means of visualizing and communicating in a realistic manner, for example, when the children create self-portraits or visualize their family or immediate surroundings:

> I always ask, "Do you really look like that? Do your legs come out directly from your head?" Of course they don't. Then we practice a little perspective. Just a bit, enough so that they can draw simple figures, boys and girls, but in a way that shows the body actually has two legs and two arms. (Olle)

In this way, according to Olle, drawing helps children develop an understanding of proportions and a sense of perspective, thereby enhancing their ability to represent the world more realistically.

Drawing in relation to alphabetic writing

Within the analysis, teachers' views on the relationship between drawing and alphabetic writing emerge in three distinct conceptualizations. Drawing is positioned as: (a) *complementary to writing*, where drawing and writing are afforded equal semiotic value; (b) *a prewriting activity* that precedes and facilitates the development of writing; and (c) as *subordinate to writing*, in which writing is framed as the primary and most valued mode and as the goal of literacy development. Although all of these codes are present in the data, the most central relation to writing is that it is complementary to drawing, suggesting that drawing may hold considerable value as a mode of communication in its own right, rather than solely being a support for writing. Nina, for instance, stresses that she "can't separate drawing and writing", and Jenny argues that these modalities "complement each other very well". Pia elaborates on how children can express themselves through drawing and writing, and that there is a "connection" which makes it easier for the children to tell what they have been doing at school when they are at home:

> Some of them could have written these words, but now they get both the drawing and the writing […] and a connection between them. They can show it when they come home and more easily explain, because there's a drawing there which strengthens the recount. (Pia)

At the same time, some of the teachers' accounts frame drawing more as a preparatory step toward writing, emphasizing its role in supporting the development of alphabetic literacy. The view of drawing as prewriting is, for instance, expressed by Kalle, who highlights that writing and drawing are especially important in the beginning, "before you start to get the hang of it. Get the hang of writing. So drawing is a kind of foundation". Or, as Bonnie points out, using pen and paper is a good way to start with an ongoing focus on fine motor skill development:

> Of course, using a pen and paper is a good way to eventually start writing. And it can be a good way to develop fine motor skills and start there, so to speak. (Bonnie)

The conceptualization of drawing as a prewriting activity is further emphasized in Solveig's reflection, where she underscores the learner's progression to "the next step," understood as the transition to alphabetic writing:

> Now I want you to move on to the next step and write. For example, we write "My weekend" and today's date, and then October or whatever it is. (Solveig)

Finally, the orientation that positions drawing as subordinate to writing is also evident in the data. This perspective is articulated through comments suggesting, for example, that it would be untenable for children to rely exclusively on drawing throughout an entire school year. As Hanna asserts, writing is considered indispensable and must be incorporated in teaching:

> You can't choose to draw your way through the entire school year. You may also need to have some form of writing, but above all, encourage them to write. Because I think many children are not very good at it, as they often sit with their iPad or computer or phone. I think you should also focus a lot on holding a pen and writing. (Hanna)

The subordination of drawing to writing may be anticipated, given its status as a core objective in early years education. From this perspective, the presence of such subordination in teachers' reflections appears understandable. However, this orientation in relation to the modes of drawing and writing is neither dominant nor strongly articulated by the teachers. Rather, teachers' reflections tend to engage with the relational dynamics and semiotic significance of drawing as an important mode. The value attributed to drawing manifests in multiple ways: as joy, communication, and as a complementary mode to writing. The view of drawing as a preliminary step to writing can be understood as pedagogically motivated, particularly within instructional contexts where the development of alphabetic writing is prioritized. This emphasis may also account for the tendency to position drawing as subordinate to alphabetic writing.

Pedagogical potentials of drawing

Pedagogical positionings are defined as deliberate didactic decisions regarding how and why drawing is employed within classroom practice and are conceptually distinct

from the teachers' descriptions of instructional practices. The concept of pedagogical positioning rather highlights the intentional integration of drawing into teaching to achieve particular educational aims. The pedagogical potentials that are evident in the analysis are: drawing as *starting point, participation, differentiation,* and *scaffolding*. These potentials are further described in the section below.

Several teachers describe drawing as a natural starting point for children at this stage of schooling, and in many of these statements, references are made to drawing as a common activity in preschool. For example, Nina emphasizes the importance of building a sense of a "gentle" school start: "You start with what's familiar and feels safest for them right now" and "It's like we're taking over from preschool". Some teachers more explicitly highlight drawing as a way to create a natural transition between preschool and school, as seen, for example, in the following quote:

> You can sometimes see that there are a few who find it hard to get started during the first weeks. That's usually before they've really grasped what school is and what's required of them. If you lower that demand a bit, things often loosen up for them, and drawing becomes a very natural way for most of them to express themselves. (Olle)

Olle specifically mentions children who may struggle with the transition to school but does not attribute this difficulty to the child's ability, but rather to the expectations they encounter within the school environment. The idea that they have not yet "understood what school is" implies that institutional norms and demands may inhibit children's spontaneous expression. When these expectations are lowered, a more permissive environment is created, one in which children's own motivation and expressive needs can emerge.

In particular, two key and closely related aspects of drawing in the preschool classroom emerge. The first relates to drawing as participation: drawing serves as a way for all pupils to engage in activities, even if they are not yet able to write, enabling them to express ideas and intentions through a visual medium. As Bonnie explains, "It's a way for them to show what they want to do, like making a story or a text". Another subtheme identified concerns drawing as differentiation and addressing a diverse pupil group where drawing functions as a way of adapting tasks to children's different abilities and developmental levels. In these teacher statements, terms such as differentiation and inclusion are often explicitly used, as illustrated in the following quote from the interview with Olle:

> Part of it is about creating a kind of differentiation in teaching. It's also about inclusion, being able to offer different ways for pupils to express themselves if they need it […]. It also creates a kind of openness in the task, where you can approach it in different ways and at different levels, and still succeed. (Olle)

Olle highlights drawing as a way of supporting both inclusion and differentiation, allowing pupils to express themselves in multiple ways and at varying levels of ability, so that all can succeed while also providing challenges for those who are more advanced.

The interview data also include a few statements relating to drawing as a scaffold that enhances other learning processes, such as writing. Anna, for example, emphasizes that drawing continues to be valuable even after children have learned to write, as it supports reflections about what they want to express: "I think it provides support. It gives them more time to think about what they want to show." Similarly, Nina describes drawing as a "supportive complement" to writing, allowing children to create texts without being constrained:

> It's really about being able to create without being held back by anything, neither in the drawing nor in the writing, because the drawing always serves as a complement. After all, the goal is eventually to get to writing. (Nina)

In sum, the findings show that drawing is deeply embedded within the instructional practices of the preschool class, permeating the teaching sequence and occupying distinct pedagogical positions. Its presence is not incidental but is ascribed specific functions and values within both learner activities and teacher strategies. The implications of these positionings are further elaborated in the following Discussion section.

Discussion

Building on previous research that highlights the prevalence of drawing in the early years of schooling (e.g., Adoniou, 2013; Andersson, 2017; Hopperstad, 2010; Norrman, 2024; Westlund, 2022) this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of drawing within the current Swedish preschool class. The findings show how drawing is systematically integrated into instructional practices and ascribed multiple values and pedagogical functions by teachers. In this section, we discuss the results in terms of three broader interpretative patterns: (1) pedagogical width; (2) bridge-building function; and (3) drawing as contradiction. These patterns display and reflect identified tensions and pedagogical possibilities which are discussed in relation to earlier research and multimodal theory.

Pedagogical width

Our findings suggest that drawing is systematically integrated into preschool class instruction rather than functioning as an isolated practice. It operates both as a learner activity and as a pedagogical resource within teaching and assessment. Consistent with prior research, drawing is often positioned in relation to alphabetic writing, highlighting its interdependence with dominant literacy practices (cf. Baghban, 2007; Christianakis, 2011; Friedrich et al., 2021; Mackenzie, 2011). This study situates drawing across multiple levels of school activity, from task design to assessment. Teachers' accounts primarily stress learner engagement: what children do when drawing, the nature of tasks, and intended content. A key conceptual theme concerns the continuum between pedagogical freedom and control. Drawing is negotiated along this axis: associated with free play rooted in social pedagogical

traditions, yet also embedded in structured literacy instruction. This dual positioning underscores flexibility, allowing drawing to function as either open-ended or regulated. Assessment practices further reveal two orientations: some value drawing's communicative potential as a legitimate mode of meaning-making (cf. Björk, 2025), while others express ambivalence due to challenges in evaluating creative forms of expression. This tension reflects an implicit hierarchy privileging writing, echoing the predominance of technical writing skills in the preschool class (Aminoff, 2021; Skoog, 2012), with drawing recognized for its pedagogical and creative utility but framed as secondary in formal assessment. Nevertheless, drawing permeates the instructional sequence, from play to structured tasks, serving both communicative and creative purposes, as well as instructional functions. This duality challenges conventional dichotomies between play and formal learning (cf. Andersson, 2017), affirming drawing as a legitimate mode of meaning-making and underscoring the need for multimodal approaches in early literacy education, where visual representation complements, rather than merely supports, writing. Drawing seems to offer children a flexible semiotic space where ideas can be explored, negotiated, and re-shaped, and where they can mobilize a wider range of resources than written language alone affords (Hopperstad, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Recognizing drawing in this way shifts attention from developmental readiness to participation: it highlights how visual modes allow children to enact agency, make their thinking visible, and be part of dialogic exchanges with teachers, peers, and cultural practices within and outside of schooling (cf. Norrman, 2024). Rather than functioning as a support for literacy, drawing may thus be acknowledged as part of the communicative modalities of early schooling and its contribution to how meaning is co-constructed and how children learn to navigate between different semiotic systems.

Bridge-building function

Teachers describe drawing as a mediating practice that bridges the transition between children's informal, experience-based meaning-making and the more formalized literacy practices of school, at the same time as conceptualizing drawing as safe and familiar.

This bridge-building function is also supported in previous research identifying drawing as a means of engaging children's prior experiences and fostering positive learner attitudes (Adoniou, 2013; Aminoff, 2021; Friedrich et al., 2021). The open-ended nature of drawing offers children entering new educational settings a mode of expression that is comparatively low-risk and inclusive. Positioned as a foundational practice within preschool (Änggård, 2005), drawing acquires transitional value in the shift to the preschool class and subsequently to the first formal school year. For children negotiating the demands of school environments, drawing thus provides a communicative resource that imposes fewer normative constraints than alphabetic writing. Although teachers acknowledge that some children resist drawing or perceive themselves as lacking in skill, the practice nonetheless enables more agency

in the physical act of mark-making, where expectations are less rigid than those governing written language. Against the backdrop of current policy reforms emphasizing formal literacy in the first school year (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2021, 2025; cf. Ackesjö & Persson, 2016), these findings underscore the importance of maintaining alternative modes of expression. Beyond their intrinsic communicative affordances, such modes carry pedagogical potential by supporting continuity and easing the transition into structured schooling.

Drawing as contradiction: Between intrinsic value and intermediary stage

The results of the study reveal a central contradiction in how drawing is positioned within early literacy instruction, in several ways. On the one hand, teachers attribute intrinsic value to drawing: it is linked to joy, creativity, engagement, and communicative intent. On the other hand, drawing is predominantly understood in relational terms (to writing). Pedagogical legitimacy is often secured by reference to its perceived contribution to alphabetic literacy. In this sense, drawing functions as an intermediary stage, valued insofar as it prepares children for writing or supports their trajectory into formal literacy. Yet this relationship is not stable. While some teachers frame drawing as a precursor or scaffold to writing, they also position drawing as a complementary mode with its own semiotic affordances. From a multimodal perspective, this complementarity is pedagogically significant: drawing provides access to meaning-making that is not reducible to, or simply preparatory for, alphabetic inscription (cf. Kress, 1997). Teachers' accounts show that children use drawing in many ways, not least for participation, highlighting the role of drawing as a communicative mode rather than as a transitional step to something "more advanced". This understanding also exposes a tension between teachers' pedagogical orientations and the institutional logic of formal schooling. As national curriculum reforms intensify the focus on formal aspects of literacy, skills, and measurable outcomes (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2021, 2025), alphabetic writing becomes the dominant evaluative reference point. This risks relegating drawing to a liminal position: it is not recognized as a primary modality with intrinsic epistemic potential. Paradoxically, drawing's subordinate status means that it largely escapes assessment regimes and the discursive pressures of performativity; it is rather ascribed the potential to engage, encourage, or even to verify learning outcomes. Yet, for the same reason, it is also rendered pedagogically peripheral and of lower curricular value, rather than as an integral mode of meaning-making.

At the same time, positioning drawing as equivalent to writing in an evaluative manner may render it more susceptible to assessment practices, which in turn introduces risks that may subdue its creative and expressive potential. This, subsequently, raises broader epistemological questions about what counts as legitimate literacy in the early years, and how and whether such literacy should be evaluated within existing assessment regimes. Despite these tensions, reconceptualizing drawing as an autonomous communicative mode may disrupt the dominant view of early literacy

as a linear progression toward alphabetic mastery (cf. Aminoff, 2021; Skoog, 2012). Instead, it frames literacy as a multimodal domain in which children deploy diverse semiotic resources for meaning-making (Björk, 2025; Björk et al., 2025; Hopperstad, 2010). Taken together, these findings underscore the need for literacy policies and pedagogical frameworks that regard multimodal repertoires not as peripheral or developmental detours, but as central resources for participation, meaning-making, and epistemic access in the early years.

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