Literacy teaching, genres and power

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Abstract
The theoretical framework of this article is based on critical literacy (Janks, 2010) and genre theories (Swales, 1990; Schleppegrell, 2004). The article’s main purpose is to contribute to an understanding of the use and production of text genres as a power-embedded practice. In doing so, we analyse first-grade children’s texts in terms of genres and sub-genres. Further, we analyse the subject positions that are constituted in the children’s texts. We understand genres as related to power since they both open and/or close ways of saying or stating things in and about the world. “Where there is power there is resistance”, as Foucault says (1976). Specific interest will be directed to children’s ways of offering resistance in their texts, namely resistance against prescribed dominant genres. This resistance is seen as a creative way for children to use their power and agency by creating hybrid genres.

Keywords: critical literacy, power, genre analysis, literacy practices, literacy teaching

Introduction
No classroom is a neutral place with regard to power as all literacy practices are embedded in ideological structures that produce and reproduce power relations (Gee, 2008; Janks, 2010). This is, of course, also true when it comes to early literacy teaching in school, which is the focus of this text. Even though the activities in these earlier literacy practices may on the surface seem harmless, if not innocent, they reproduce child-centred text activities that are part of a long-lived didactic literacy teaching tradition. Which power relations can be at stake when 7-year-olds struggle to write their first texts consisting of their names, their family members’ names or their favourite pet? Which subject positions are constituted in these processes, where it seems that the children and the teacher are just being themselves? However, in a critical literacy perspective, from which this article is written, there are no harmless literacy practices existing outside power structures where people simply are themselves. Here we understand literacy practices as places where subject positions are constituted – subject positions that offer specific ways of understanding the self and the world and thereby also enable and restrict the subject’s action.

The study accounted for in this article is part of a larger research project where the process of digitalisation of literacy practices and digitalisation’s implications for...
children’s literacy development and the teacher’s professional development in their literacy teaching is studied (Hultin & Westman, 2012). In this article we present a sub-study based on children’s written texts. However, the article’s main purpose is to contribute to an understanding of the use and production of text genres as a power-embedded practice. In doing so, we will analyse first-grade children’s texts in terms of genres and sub-genres. Further, we will analyse the subject positions that are constituted in the children’s texts. We understand genres as related to power since they both open and/or close ways of saying or stating things in and about the world. “Where there is power there is resistance”, as Foucault says (1976). Specific interest will be directed to children’s ways of offering resistance in their texts, namely resistance against prescribed dominant genres. This resistance is seen as a creative way for children to use their power and agency by creating hybrid genres. The theoretical framework is based on critical literacy and genre theories. Many literacy studies have been conducted in the tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS) where an understanding of literacy practices stresses literacy as heterogeneous and pluralistic phenomena. However, many of the ethnographical studies conducted in this tradition seem to describe vernacular literacy practices in a neutral way, unrelated to power in a broader sense (Barton 1994; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanić, 2000). This is also the case of many Scandinavian studies conducted in the same tradition (Fast, 2007; Hultin & Westman, 2012; Kronholm-Cederberg, 2009; Skoog, 2012 and Westman, 2009). Therefore, it is interesting to discuss early literacy practices in terms of power (Janks 2010). The language of schooling has, traditionally and conceptually, exposed the more dominant literacy practices in society, whereas NLS theoretically puts different literacy practices forward. However, if the concept of power is neglected in pupils’ use of different literacy practices in school, pupils are at risk of being both marginalised and neglected. Earlier research showed that children from communities that radically differ from the school’s social practices, with regard to values, knowledge, ways of using oral and written language, are especially at risk of being marginalised in school as their previous (literate) experiences are not considered valuable in school (Heath, 1983; Gee, 2008).

We use the critical literacy approach Janks suggests in her book *Literacy and Power* (2010) in which she puts four key concepts forward that interdependently form a “synthesis for critical literacy education” that highlights the relationship between language and power (Janks, 2010, p. 23). The four concepts are *domination, access, diversity* and *design*. We use this approach as a theoretical starting point that enables us to understand the literacy practices and the texts we analyse in a certain way. The language in schools, and the teaching and its contents, are understood here as *dominant* forms of languages, literacies and knowledge. The genres prescribed in literacy teaching are also seen as dominant genres. The literacy teaching studied here is explicitly intended to provide children with *access* to literacy and knowledge that, further on in life, will give them *access* to the labour market and to participation in
political life. This understanding of literacy and knowledge as a gateway to emancipation and prosperity is the cornerstone idea of the Enlightenment (cf. Kant, 1789) and since that time has been central to many modern emancipatory projects all over the world (cf. Freire, 1972). However, as Janks (2004) has pointed out, teaching for access may create an access paradox. This implies that teaching which stresses, and thereby strengthens, the importance of dominant forms does so at the cost of more marginalised forms. In relation to the concept of access, we analyse in which ways the prescribed genres can be understood as access to literacy, and when they can be understood as dead ends in children’s writing. Also linked to this is an analysis of the diversity of languages and discourses in the children’s texts. Different discourses offer different subject positions, which make it possible to see the world from different perspectives. The concept of diversity also reminds us to focus on children’s differences (in preferences, experiences as well as sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds). With Gee, those differences can be understood as the children coming from different primary discourses (the first socialising unit that a person meets in life, i.e. the home environment) which might encompass totally different perspectives on language, knowledge or the world than that secondary discourse the children encounter at school (2008, pp. 156-157). Finally, the concept of design reminds us that children are not only captured in power-embedded structures. They are also creative agents capable of acting within the contexts in which they participate, and thereby they occasionally contribute to change the context. As pointed out earlier, we understand children’s creation of hybrid genres as a way of resisting power – in other words, as a redesigning practice. This part of Janks’ model is important as it gives an opportunity for agents (here, children) to act. Without these possibilities there would be no social change.

Like Janks, Gee also stresses that discourse and power are intertwined by using the concepts of discourse with a lower-case “d” and Discourse with a capital “D”:

> let me point out that I will use “discourse” with a little “d” for language in use or connected stretched of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays, and so forth. So “discourse” is part of “Discourse” – “Discourse” with a big “D” is always more than just language (2008, p. 154).

In Gee’s perspective, oral and written texts in all social practices are thus always related to societal power-embedded structures.

Genre, which is a key concept in this article, is in many ways problematic, and the broad discussion of the notion of genre indicates different ways of understanding it. Basically, genre can be seen as something based more or less on textual factors and/or based on relations between text and context. The more textual concept of genre is represented by the Sydney Genre School, influenced by Halliday’s (2004) systemic functional grammar, where the stages, structure and aim of the text classify its genre. Martin defines genre as “a staged, goal-orientated, and purposeful social activity that
people engage in as members of their culture” (1984:25). In more contextual ways of understanding, genre can be classified based on rhetorical practices (Miller 1984/1994) or as classes of communicative events with common communicative purposes, named by the members using it (Swales, 1990). In line with Miller and Swales, the rationale of the concept of genre lies in understanding the genre as open for transformation and redesign, due to the literacy context. However, our theoretical starting point in critical literacy emphasises genre as power-embedded.

In the text analysis we operationalise the concept of genre in three different analytical units; genre, sub-genre and hybrid genre. Genre is used as an overall analytical unit. In many ways, the classification is based on an understanding of more traditional genres commonly used in schools, and not always grounded in text theories. The starting point in our analysis is the description of school genres made by the Sydney Genre School: narratives, recounts, reports, instructions, explanations and arguments (Martin, 1984; Schleppegrell 2004). However, the fact that we use the Sydney Genre school’s descriptions of school genres does not imply that we share this genre school’s epistemological conception of genre as something quite stable. As has been pointed out before, we understand genres as being socially constituted and plastic phenomena that change into new forms (hybridisation) as agents use them for new purposes and in new situations. This epistemological understanding of genre is more in line with Miller and Swales. Thus, the purpose of using school genres in this text is solely analytical.

The second analytical unit of the text analysis is the sub-genre, which enables us to sub-categorise the genres on a more content-based level. For example, a report on domestic animals can form a sub-genre of the report genre. In the text material we also find some texts with features of different genres. The mixing of structural- and content-based parts from different genres leads to hybrid genres. Ergo, the third analytical unit is the hybrid genre. Again, we need to stress that we understand all genres as the result of an on-going process of hybridisation. Using the term hybrid genre here simply indicates that these are examples of genres compounded from quite traditional genre forms.

Method

The texts of the first-graders analysed in this article are collected from two first-year classrooms in two different schools in a municipality 200 km north of Stockholm in Sweden. The municipality is a non-rural, industrial area with one large steel plant as the most important industry. Socio-economically, the area is mainly working class. Both classes studied largely consist of children who can be regarded as ethnically homogeneous, white, working-class Swedes. Most of the children in the studied classes are native Swedish speakers.

Both teachers in these classrooms are part of a development project called “Learning to read through writing on computers” along with approximately 30 other first-grade school teachers. The teachers in the project are introducing a new method in
their early literacy teaching, namely, teaching children to read through writing on computers, without using pencils, from the start. The children’s own texts are used as important reading material. The computers are equipped with speech synthesis programs, spelling programs, alphabetic playful programs etc.

We conducted week-long classroom observations in the two classrooms where the texts were collected. In addition, interviews with children and teachers were carried out. Besides that, we collected a full sample of 12 particular children’s written texts from August until April. During the week we studied the classrooms, we participated in all activities in the schools — not only in the literacy teaching, but also in mathematics, civics, and playing with the children in the schoolyard during their lunch break. There were two motivations for studying the classroom activities and getting to know the children and teachers where we collected the texts. First, texts are always produced in social contexts (Fairclough, 1992). Understanding the social contexts of texts, i.e. understanding the social practice and historical and contemporary power structures, creates a deeper understanding of them. Understanding the context of texts is thereby a form of triangulation of the result, which may help in making reasonable claims about the outcomes of the text analysis.

Second, spending time in the field in order for researchers and actors in the field to get to know each other is important from an ethical point of view, especially when the actors are children. For instance, obtaining informed consent for doing research on children’s literacy practices, activities and texts is not something you acquire once and for all. Instead, every time we planned to observe a child’s literacy activities or interview a child, we pointed out that their participation was voluntary, and that they could say no if they felt uncomfortable participating. We also paid careful attention to the children’s body language to see if they showed signs of resistance of being observed, interviewed etc. We also noticed how the children could ask us questions about our research more easily when they had got to know us a little better. In other words, spending time in the field gave us more solid informed consent from the study participants.

Historically, early literacy teaching has been dominated by two main teaching traditions: phonic and whole language. These two traditions contain different views on both literacy development and of teaching methods. The phonic tradition holds that literacy education should start with pupils meeting one letter at a time, presented in a pre-decided order. These letters are then put together into words and sentences. This perspective goes from parts to whole language, and knowledge of letters and phonological awareness are essential. Within this perspective, there is a divide between orality and literacy where literacy should be presented in a structured way. The whole language tradition stresses the opposite. Here it is believed that literacy education should start with whole texts that are then parsed into sentences and words. In this perspective, the pupils’ experiences and interests are the starting point. The whole language tradition understands literacy development as something that comes natu-
rally if children encounter written language in meaningful situations. From a critical literacy perspective it is reasonable to assume that the power relations within these traditions differ. The phonics tradition gives little space for the pupils’ own preferences and references; the pupils’ agency therefore seems to be restricted. In contrast, in the whole language tradition pupils’ experiences are the starting point for literacy teaching, which may indicate that the pupils there have more agency to influence the literacy practice. We say this with some caution as no studies have been done on how power relations differ in phonic classrooms and whole language classrooms. In the municipality where this study takes place, the phonic tradition seems to have been the dominant early literacy teaching method. However, in Hultin & Westman (2013) we point out that in the project studied, where early literacy teaching is digitalised, new ways of teaching early literacy have been experienced, and teaching early literacy using computers may in some ways open up new ways of understanding the concept of power.

Nonetheless, in the study accounted for in this article we address the question of power and agency by analysing which genres and subject positions are constituted in the pupils’ texts. In doing so, we contribute new knowledge about power and agency within early literacy practices. As we primarily analyse texts here, we are fully aware that subject positions other than those in the texts may be constituted in this literacy practice. Having observed the activities in the classroom and in the school yard, we have noticed how children are constantly negotiating their subject positions relative to the teacher as well as among themselves, but these negotiated subject positions will be the subject of another article.

**Text material**

The text material on which this article is based was collected in two first-grade classes in a non-rural, working-class area in central Sweden during their first year of school. The material consists of all computer-written texts from 12 selected children, three boys and three girls from each class, during the period from August until April, in their first year in school. The principles behind the selection of children were that we wanted an equal amount of boys and girls as well as children starting school with differing literacy skills. Therefore, both classes are represented with one child with hardly any literacy skills at the beginning of first grade, one with average literacy skills and one with well-developed literacy skills. This classification was made by the teacher after discussions with the researchers. Hence, both children with no basic literacy skills as well as children with more developed literacy skills were selected, and are represented in equal numbers. Since these classes use computers alone for writing texts, all texts are saved in personal folders on the computers and servers, and are therefore easily collected. The total number of texts collected is 417 and they are divided among the children as shown in Table 1. The specific children themselves and their literacy skills are not the focus of this article, but their texts. The written texts
do not therefore represent a specific child, but are seen more as texts representing the whole text material. The length of the texts varies from just a few words or a few sentences up to longer texts of several pages. Naturally, longer texts are more common at the end of the period. Many texts are also multimodal: most commonly, the children attach pictures to their texts. The genres represented also vary, which is further explained below. One outcome of the use of computers as a writing tool is that the texts are almost always correctly spelt. Since the children use spelling programs and other writing programs, one of the pedagogical implementations with this specific method is that the texts are not considered ready until they are correctly written. Because of this, the texts in the examples differ from hand-written texts prepared by 7-year-olds.

| School   | Child   | Total number of texts |
|----------|---------|-----------------------|
| School A | Boy 1   | 40                    |
|          | Boy 2   | 39                    |
|          | Boy 3   | 43                    |
|          | Girl 1  | 38                    |
|          | Girl 2  | 42                    |
|          | Girl 3  | 39                    |
| School B | Boy 1   | 32                    |
|          | Boy 2   | 26                    |
|          | Boy 3   | 29                    |
|          | Girl 1  | 26                    |
|          | Girl 2  | 31                    |
|          | Girl 3  | 32                    |

Table 1. Number of texts written by specific children

**Text analysis**

The text material is analysed in four stages. First, all texts are analysed as school genres. In this stage we take our starting point in the abovementioned school genres: *narratives, recounts, reports, instructions, explanations* and *arguments* (Martin, 1984; Schleppegrell, 2004). This model of school genres is in some ways a blunt analytical tool as it does not clearly distinguish factual texts from fictional ones. Further, genres such as poetry and drama are not represented in the model, even though they are commonly used genres in schools, especially poetry. That is why we only take this model of school genres as a starting point, as we simultaneously look for other genres. Thus, the content of the texts as well as whether or not the text is named by its author are also taken into consideration when categorising the texts. Second, we analyse these found school genres further into sub-genres. These sub-genres are mainly categorised based on the content of the text. The presentation in this article only represents sub-genres for one of the genres: *the report*. Third, we analyse the text material in search of hybrid genres, i.e. texts with features representing different
genres. Fourth, we analyse the subject positions constituted in the text material and how these subject positions are related to genre. Finally, the result of the text analysis is discussed in terms of domination, access, diversity and design, as described above.

**School genres**

The text material is mainly classified into specific genres based on formal aspects, specifically the social purpose or goal, the structure and specific linguistic features of a certain text, in accordance with the analytical methods of the Sydney Genre School (Schleppegrell, 2004). However, for some of the written texts this analytical tool was inapplicable. In these cases, a more inductive method was used, based more on content and form rather than linguistic features. Here the genre classification is more in line with the traditional genres of epic, lyric and drama introduced by Aristotle. In the analysed text material, we analytically discerned five school genres; narratives, reports, recounts, poems and performative. As we can see, only the three first mentioned coincide with the school genres described above, whereas the two last are more fictitious text types. Table 2 shows the distribution of school genres in two pupils’ texts. This distribution is representative of the genre distribution in the whole text material.

| School    | Report | Recount | Narrative | Poems | Performative |
|-----------|--------|---------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| School A: |        |         |           |       |              |
| Girl 3    | 18     | 3       | 7         | 1     | 7            |
| School B: |        |         |           |       |              |
| Boy 1     | 17     | 3       | 5         | 3     | 3            |

Table 2: The distribution of genres in two pupils’ texts

As we can see, the report genre is most frequently represented. The genre characteristics of the report are: a set of facts, organised by classification or a part-whole relationship, generic participants, timeless verbs in simple present tense (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 85). The narrative is the second-most frequent genre, even though it is far from being as common as the report. The genre characteristics of the narrative are: events in relation to chronology, plot, conflict and solution (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 85). Recounts and performatives come next. The characteristics of recounts are: a retelling of a sequence of events, and drawing on personal experience (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 85). We characterised texts as performative genre when they are neither narratives nor poems, but contain dialogue or monologue that could be part of a performance. The less frequent genre is poems. The poetry genre is no longer characterised by rhyme but by rhythm and typographic form as well as content.
Almost all school genres are prescribed by the teacher, not the least through giving certain sentence patterns the pupils are encouraged to use, for instance in the reports I can, I want to, My family (more detailed examples follow in the sections below on sub-genres). In some cases, however, a text written in a certain school genre is the result of the pupil’s interpretation of the task. When all children write a text that we categorise as a recount, entitled In winter, one boy instead writes a story set in winter, but told as a narrative with a clear conflict that obtains a solution. In this case, one could say that this boy gained agency with which he could express himself in a form that suited him since he resisted living up to the genre expectations as the other children did. Another example of this is when all children were to write a fairy tale with its classic genre characteristics such as once upon a time and they lived happily ever after. However, one boy did not write a fairy tale but a report with historical facts on the Second World War. This can also be seen as an example of a child gaining agency by not doing the expected. A third example of this is when a girl, on the very first occasion of literacy teaching in school, instead of writing a report on the theme I am, wrote a recount of events from her summer holiday with her family. While all the other children wrote short texts consisting of sentences that all began with I am, she wrote a full-page recount with a complex sentence structure. She already knew how to read and write when she started school. In this case, she had agency and wrote a text that was more appropriate to her writing skills than the simpler genre the teacher had prescribed. Here, though, it seems that it was the result of her not understanding the genre expectations in class rather than her offering resistance to it since, after that occasion, she always wrote the same simple text genres as her schoolmates did. This could be explained as an example of the pupil internalising the importance for children of matching the subject position in class as a good pupil who obeys and does what the teacher tells her to do, even though it means that the pupil in question had to underachieve.

**Sub-genres**

In the empirical material, the report is by far the most common genre represented. However, this does not mean that all texts classified as report resemble each other. Within this genre, we analytically discerned at least three sub-genres mainly based on the content of the texts; personal reports, reports on animals, and reports on seasons and seasonal feasts. Below we present these sub-genres of the report genre, and their concepts. We also found sub-genres of the narrative genre but, notably, not for the other genres found. However, only the report genre will be discussed here.

**Personal reports**

A large number of the texts are classified as personal reports. This genre is the first the children write in when they start school in the autumn. The content of these texts is based on the children’s own notion of themselves, and most texts describe personal
knowledge the child has. Initially, the form of the text is prescribed by the teacher and the children either write themselves or copy from something the teacher has written. The texts are constructed around phrases such as: I can..., I like..., I will..., My family is .... The children copy these phrases and fill in something personal about themselves. These prescribed forms restrict what can be said and signal what is not appropriate. This can explain why most texts resemble each other in content, which is always within the limits of the socially acceptable. Children do not write about experiences of parents’ social problems or other more difficult experiences that we know that some of the children have. Example 1 illustrates one of these texts, translated into English.

Example 1. I can...

|               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| Jag kan spela spel. | I can play games.  |
| Jag kan skriva på dator. | I can write on the computer. |
| Jag kan sitta.    | I can sit.     |
| Jag kan gå.      | I can walk.    |

Name
måndag den 12 september 2011

The personal report is classified as a report since it presents facts about the child and things around it, written in a very restricted form. In this sense, another possible interpretation of these texts would be that they are a hybrid of personal genres and factual genres. In these personal reports we found the pre-decided and set form to be an important notion for categorising the genre, which then leads to the personal report. However, this reminds us of the difficulty of analysing and categorising texts in this way and the notion of genres as plastic and transforming.

Reports on animals

The most common report is the factual report describing different animals, both domestic and wild, mostly from Nordic countries. This sub-genre in many ways resembles the factual report described above in both form and content. Here each text presents one animal generically, with general facts describing the specific animal’s breeding, food and appearance. The earlier texts on animals resemble the texts representing the personal report sub-genre. In example 2, a text about a pig illustrates such texts.
Example 2. The Pig

| The Pig | The Pig is fat.  
The pig is playful.  
The pig is fast.  
The pig mummy is called a sow.  
The pig daddy is called a boar.  
They have bad eyesight.  |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Name    | 8 December 2011                                               |

Here the children are free to choose from given facts and also to choose the facts they find most interesting.

As the children develop their writing, the texts grow longer and more elaborate, and have a more complex structure. In that sense, texts classified as reports on animals also develop in both their form and content. In example 3 this is illustrated in a text about the bear. It is notable that the text is now multimodal, with a picture illustrating the written text. However, the children are still allowed to choose freely from given facts. One consequence of this is that the facts presented are not structured in any particular way, which in a sense leads to the reports on animals genre not being as thoroughly realised as it might be.

Example 3. The Bear

| The Bear | The bear eats plants, grass and blueberries.  
It can run 40 km per hour.  
The bear does not care if the water is cold.  
The babies stay with the mother for 3 years.  
The babies play with the fish.  
The bear sleeps in the winter.  
It is brown.  
The mummy doesn’t need to be so close to the babies.  
It is a good runner.  |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Name      | 20 March 2012                                                    |
Reports on seasons and seasonal feasts

A second sub-genre of the report is found in the text material, namely the sub-genre reports on seasons and seasonal feasts. Here the contents of the texts are concentrated on different seasons of the year and the feasts related to them. We find texts on St. Lucia’s Day, Christmas, winter and Easter. These texts are classified as reports, both formally and content-wise. In example 4 we find a text describing Easter which illustrates this. Again, facts are presented in a non-structured way.

Example 4. Easter

| Text | Name |
|------|------|
| At Easter the Easter bunny comes. | tisdag den 3 april 2012 |
| At Easter you get candy. | Easter |
| On Maundy Thursday you hide broomsticks and put a cross on the door. | At Easter you paint eggs. |
| At Easter you dress up. | At Easter, Easter witches come. |
| At Easter witches come. | Easter Eve is on a Saturday. |
| Easter Eve is on a Saturday. | At Easter we decorate with chickens and other Easter things. |

| Name | Text |
|------|------|
| tisdag den 3 april 2012 | Påsk |
| På påsken kommer påskharen. | På påsken får man godis. |
| På påsken fär man godis. | På påsken spela man på hallvallen. |
| På påsken gör man nycklar och sätter ett kors på dörren. | På påsken mälar man ägg. |
| På påsken klär man ut sig. | På påsken kommer det Påsk-stång. |
| På påsken kommer det häxor. | På påsken kommer det häxor. |
| På påsken är på en lörda. | På påsken brukar man pynta med kycklingar och andra påsk saker. |

Textually, this genre much resembles the other sub-genres described above, where factual statements are placed in lines under each other. Many of these texts are also prescribed by the teacher’s pre-written text on the white board or smart board. This is seen in the texts, as many sentences start off in the same way, which in example 4 is illustrated by the repetition of “At Easter...”. This genre is very much in line with the traditional curriculum in Swedish primary schools where seasons, traditions and the local area are highly focused on.

Hybrid genres

Some of the texts in the material are very difficult to classify into any specific genre. Some texts mix more structural- and more content-based parts from different genres. When this happens, new forms of texts, or hybrid genres, are created. These hybrids are interesting in many ways – textually, content-wise and creatively. Examples of this are: hybrids between personal reports and reports on animals, hybrids between recounts and reports and hybrids between narratives and reports.
In a sense, many of these hybrids are created and constructed in the same way. The most common way of creating hybrids is to use the more restricted pre-decided textual forms prescribed by the teacher in another context. In this way, many texts that are intentional recounts resemble reports formally and structurally. Examples of this are the texts describing the children’s Christmas holiday. Traditionally, the school essay on “My holiday” is both a common and set school genre, interpreted as a recount. Here this school genre is hybridised into something with a great resemblance to a factual report, mainly structurally and formally, whereas the content is still related to the recount. An illustration of this is given in example 5.

Example 5. Christmas holiday

| Christmas holiday | Christmas holiday |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Jag har äkt ekridkor. | I have received Christmas gifts. |
| Jag har lekt med min lillebror. | I have played with my little brother. |
| Jag har fått jul klapper. | I have watched fireworks. |
| Jag har kollat på raketer. | I have been watching TV. |
| Jag har kollat på tv. |                                |

Here the repetition of the introduction phrase “I have...” constitutes the hybrid between recount and report. Another example of hybrid genres is illustrated by texts called My favourite animal, which are formed by a mixture of the personal report and reports on animals genres. In example 6, factual, non-generic statements about a dog are mixed with very personal statements of the child’s conceptions and experiences of, in this case, dogs.

Example 6. My favourite animal

| My favourite animal | My favourite animal |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Hundar är snälla. Jag leker med hundar för att de är snälla. De är fina. Jag vill ha en hund. | A dog is kind. I play with dogs because they are nice. They look good. I want to have a dog. |
| Hundar är gosiga. De är mjuka. De är stora. | Dogs are cuddly. They are soft. They are big. |
| Hundar är fina. Jag är inte med hundar så ofta. | Dogs look good. I don’t hang around dogs so often. |

This forms a text that is neither a personal nor a factual report, but a hybrid of these two sub-genres. Typically, the form offered is based on the pre-written sentences such as “They are...” and “I want...”, but when expressing more personal opinions on dogs in general the sentence structure broadens.

One reason this hybrid genre is forceful in this setting is because many of the children are beginners in reading and writing. In a way, the structured forms can
be understood as a means of helping them to write whole texts, which also is the explanation the teachers give for using set forms. However, pre-formulated set forms can also be counterproductive for those children who come to school with more developed literacy competencies. One effect of this is the risk that such children start underachieving.

**Subject positions**

When analysing the pupils’ texts from a critical literacy perspective, it becomes apparent that subject positions are constituted in all texts. In some texts there is only one subject position, while in others there are several, which are at times conflicting. Thus, where there is a text there is at least one subject position. Several of the subject positions are closely related to each other and in those cases they will be presented in the groups below.

**The factual, non-personal narrator**

In the genre most frequently used in the text material, the reports on animals sub-genre, the subject position that we choose to call the factual, non-personal narrator, is constituted. The writers of these texts are more or less invisible as the subject position functions as a channel for reporting facts on animals. The factual, correct tone in the text creates claims that the facts are told from a neutral place which affirms that the facts are solid. In a few exceptions, other subject positions are constituted which compete with the factual, non-personal narrator. In some texts on wolves, there are at least traces of a political subject, which will be discussed below. In still other texts on bears (see example 2), some children write about the mummy and daddy bear, which creates a subject position that can instead be called a personal narrator, still delivering facts but in a personal and perhaps infantile way. The tone of this narrator resembles the ones of fables. The personal narrator subject position in reports on animals opens the text for words and experiences that are closer to the children’s world of experience.

**The normal child – the good child**

In the children’s texts that are classified as personal reports, there is a cluster of subject positions that all can be related to the subject positions: the normal child and the good child. What is normal and what is ideal (good) are closely intertwined; the ideal constitutes normality even though some qualities are even better than the normal, ergo good.

The normal/good child as a subject position is frequently represented in the texts as I am, I want to, I have, I can, My family, My house. What is normal/good is also clearly gender-coded. Many girls write “I am nice, I am happy, I am funny, I am helpful” while the boys write “I am a winner, I am good at hockey”, although of course at times they write “I am nice, I am happy”.

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A variant of being the normal/good child is to be the social child, and in many of the personal reports, especially in the texts I have or in some cases My family, children write about their friends, and in one case, girlfriend.

Another variant is the subject position The competent child, which is frequently constituted in the texts I can. Here the children write about their competencies as “I can swim, I can fish, I can bake, I can skate”. This subject position tends to overlap with the subject position the good pupil which, of course, is also a variant of the normal/good child. The good pupil is constructed by sentences such as “I can write, I can write with small letters, I can do maths, I can work at the computer”. When children construct the good pupil in their text, it does not necessarily correspond with the particular child’s real competence. One boy constructed the good pupil in his text through sentences such as “I can write” when he still did not know the letters of the alphabet. At that time, he could write only by copying the teacher’s writing from a handwritten note. Still, he could constitute the subject position the good pupil, which might have helped him on his way to being literate (cf. Smith, 1997).

The values expressed in the texts here are analysed as constituting the normal child and the good child – being positive, happy, nice, competent, willing to learn, good at school work etc. – corresponding with an earlier anthropological study on how the normal/good pupil is constructed in Swedish schools (Bartholdsson, 2007). The results of this study show that the normal/good pupil is one who is positive, happy, not negative or critical, and willing to do what is expected of her/him (Bartholdsson, 2007).

It also seems that it is more important to be normal than good, if we consider again the example above of the girl who stopped writing the long, complex texts of which she was capable in order to follow the teacher’s instructions and write the prescribed simpler genres, which led to her underachieving.

However, the constructions of the normal/good child/pupil are at times challenged by other constructed subject positions in the very same text. For instance, in a text on I am, one boy first constructs the good/normal child by writing: “I am nice, I am happy” and “I am helpful in school”. In the midst of these sentences, he writes “I am a fish, I am a mummy, I am a werewolf at night”. These sentences construct what we call a playfully evasive subject position. Its content is fictional, and thereby deconstructing the subject position the normal/good child, through challenging the seriousness of the latter.

The political subject

A political subject is constituted in two different kinds of texts; firstly, in texts on wolves, classified as reports on animals and, secondly, in texts on peace, classified as poems. In the first case, it might be more accurate to say that it is possible to discern analytically traces of a political subject as a political discourse on how to handle a growing number of wild animals (predators) in our forests. The issue of wolves has been an infectious political issue in Sweden during the last decade, especially in
regions where packs of wolves have grown, which is the case in the region where this study’s school is located. There are basically two sides to this debate, where one side argues it is necessary that the number of wolves be allowed to increase, while the other side argues that it should be allowed to hunt wolves that cause damage to people and domestic animals. Examples of traces of this political discourse can be found in example 7.

Example 7. The wolf

| Varg | The wolf |
|------|----------|
| För 200 år sedan dödade en varg en människa i Gästrikland. Det finns cirka 200 vargar i Sverige. I varje flock finns ett ledarpar. Vargar äter älg och rådjur. Vargar har ett eget revir eller område. | Two hundred years ago a wolf killed a human being in the province of Gästrikland. There are about 200 wolves in Sweden. In every pack of wolves there is a leading couple. Wolves eat elk and deer. Wolves have their own territory or area. |
| Vargar kan ta får och lamm. | Wolves can take sheep or lambs. |
| Vargar är fridlysta. | Wolves are protected. |
| Vargar lever i flock | Wolves live in packs. |
| Name | Monday, 23 January 2012 |

The first sentence in example 7 can be understood as part of the political argumentation for preserving wolves in Sweden, as they are not dangerous – they have not killed anyone in 200 years. In sentences four and five, we find facts that are used as arguments in the mentioned political discourse. The fact that wolves have killed domestic animals is one of the main arguments for allowing wolf hunting. The second-last sentence can be seen as an answer to the demand to allow wolf hunting – you cannot hunt wolves as they are protected. Arguments for or against a species’ preservation are, however, rare in the reports on animals genre, where the facts are usually put forward as solid and non-contestable. We choose to say that in this text, and texts similar to this, we can discern traces of a political subject through the echoing political discourse, as the writer does not explicitly use the argument in an argumentation for or against the wolves, but instead presents them as solid facts in a report on an animal. If the writer had presented the same ‘facts’ as arguments in an argumentation, a political subject would have been more clearly constituted in the text. However, it is interesting to see that it seems to be difficult to avoid the political debate on wolves, which is so heated in this region, even when the pupils are supposed to write a factual report on the wolf species.
In texts classified as poems on peace, which the children wrote for UN Day, a political subject is more clearly constituted. The content of the poems on peace does not vary much between the children’s different texts, even though some texts are longer than others. Thus, the poem in example 8 below is representative in both content and form of all the peace poems in the empirical material.

**Example 8. Peace**

| Fred | Peace |
|------|-------|
| Jag önskar att det inte blir några fler krig. | I wish that there will be no more wars. |
| Jag önskar att alla kan visa kärlek för varandra. | I wish everyone could express love to one another. |
| Jag önskar att alla kunde vara vänner. | I wish that all could be friends. |
| Jag önskar att alla kunde vara hjälpsamma. | I wish that all could be helpful. |

Name: Namasen, måndag den 24 oktober 2011

The content of the poem is understood as political, as the writer stresses with the verb *wish* how he/she wants the world to be. The verb *wish* also signals that phenomena such as *peace* and *war* belong to a societal dimension of life which the individual cannot necessarily influence directly, even though she/he can express wishes regarding this dimension. However, even if the children in these poems clearly use a language of politics, since they express their wishes related to our common world, their wishes are not articulated individually in different ways, but all seem to be moulded in the same form with the same content. Ironically, the construction of a political subject seems not to have been the result of children using their agency. Instead, they have realised a prescribed genre including a specific construction of a political subject.

**The aesthetic subject**

In texts classified as poems on sensory perceptions an aesthetic subject is constructed. These poems are named after colours such as “Blue”, “White” and “Yellow”, and the children express what, for instance, “blue” looks, tastes, feels and sounds like. Even though the form is prescribed after a certain pattern (blue/white/yellow looks like... blue/white/yellow feels like etc.), the children come up with different suggestions of what blue, for example, looks like. In these texts, the children seem to have more agency than in the poems where the political subject was constructed.
Discussion

The context of this study is two first-grade classes learning to write by using computers instead of pencils. The results show that this has different effects on both the learning context and the learning outcomes. It also creates different, and probably new, literacy practices. In terms of domination, we see some dominant genres which seem to be central in the literacy practices formed. The dominant genres found in this study are the report and, to some extent, the narrative. The report can be interpreted as a sort of factual text, whilst the narrative is a more personal text. However, it is interesting to see that the dominant genres found in some ways differ from what is traditionally found in primary school classrooms. The far most common genre here is the factual report which differs from what is traditionally the most common genre in primary schools, the narrative or the personal recount (Westman, 2012).

These dominant genres are introduced, predesigned and prescribed by the teachers, which in itself is an act of domination. When writing in these dominant genres, the children as writers exercise their agency in different ways. The possibility to do so varies with the genres offered, and more factual genres and more set forms narrow the children’s opportunities to exhibit agency. In that sense, the space for diversity also narrows. Writing in more personal genres can, to some extent at least, seem to broaden the possibility of diversity. But, interestingly, the children perform resistance when writing. To some degree, they use their agency and resist the prescribed genre forms when they redesign the genres and produce hybrid genres. They also show resistance in the texts against the prescribed good pupil when they broaden the content of the genres by, for example, using fiction in factual genres and positioning themselves in opposition to the prescribed good pupil or child. ³

However, the teachers can be seen as a subject of domination as well since the national curriculum also prescribes text types that can be understood as examples of the genres used here. In other words, the dominant genres within the literacy practices can be understood as the teachers’ interpretation of the national curriculum. In that sense, the choice of genres is an act of domination both locally and nationally. From one point of view, this can be interpreted as the intention for children to gain access to a more public literacy. As we have seen, the report genre, particularly the report on animals sub-genre, demands the ability to express oneself in a factual, non-personal style, where vernacular expressions and personal reflections are not accepted. Such stylistic demands are often found in public discourses, such as academic discourses and/or some political discourses. These public discourses are not necessarily discourses that the children encounter in their home environments or, to use Gee’s term, in their primary discourses, which is why it can be argued that it is important that children encounter them in school in order to be able to participate in such discourses, as preparation both for working life and for participating in democracy as adults. However, the fact that children are not being allowed to use
linguistic features (i.e. dialect, vernacular expressions etc.) or earlier experiences from their primary discourses when writing in dominant school genres can be seen as an example of the access paradox. As mentioned above, the dominant genres are made important at the cost of the more marginalised genres and discourses, such as those the children in this study bring to school (Janks, 2004; Gee, 2008). Ironically, the preparation for democracy and working life through education that gives access to dominant discourses and genres here risks reproducing the social order where some discourses and genres (here: children’s primary discourses) are marginalised and valued as less important.

Further, there is also another perspective which reminds us that attaining the ability to participate in public genres through learning how to write in more non-personal, factual styles is not enough to prepare children for participating in working life and civic, democratic life. We have seen few examples of the construction of a political subject in our material and, when a political subject is constructed, it is in a narrowly prescribed form which does not allow pupils to express their views or experiences. We understand the absence of constructions of a political subject in the texts as an absence of encouragement for children to express their views on different matters. Children are asked who they are, what they can do, what they want in relation to their personal lives, i.e. in relation to their primary discourses – which results in texts where constructions of the good and competent child are made.

When children construct the subject positions the normal child/ the good child and the good pupil in their texts this can be understood as a reconstruction of the power relations in school where children and pupils are supposed to be in a good mood and exhibit good behaviour (as in happy, nice, well-mannered) as well as being positive towards engaging in school work. During our classroom observations, we could see that teachers constantly reminded pupils of these values when pupils did not behave accordingly. When the constructions of, for instance, the good pupil are made in texts, it might be seen as an internalisation of the power structure and an acceptance, at least temporarily, of the construction of the good pupil that they are supposed to live up to. So even when children are asked to use experiences from their primary discourse on, for example, how they are and what they want, the school discourse and its values are not challenged but instead reproduced. Gee points out that different discourses (when referring to discourses as practices rather than single utterances/texts) always encompass “specific socially recognizable identities [that are] engaged in specific socially recognizable activities” (2008, p. 155). Such identities are always constructed within the logic of a Discourse with a capital “D” (Gee, 2008). In this article, we have called such “specific socially recognizable identities” subject positions. Still, as has been pointed out, there is resistance to those constructions of the good child/pupil in the text, both through the playfully evasive subject positions where children write that they are fish, werewolves, mummies etc., but also when the
realised construction of *the good pupil* happens to be a werewolf eating girls at the same time. As we can see, these examples of resistance, which can be understood as challenges of the values of the school discourse, are not constructed in relation to the children’s primary discourses but to a fictitious discourse. However, the story about the werewolf who is a good pupil in school but simultaneously eats girls in what can be understood as its primary discourse seems to play with the fact that we have different identities/subject positions in different discourses. The examples of resistance are, however, few in comparison to the examples of the constructions of *the good child/pupil*, which shows that the power relations in their common social world in school, where adult teachers have more power than children, have not been challenged in any radical sense.

We believe that if school should take the responsibility to educate pupils for their future civic life as democratic citizens seriously, children need to be encouraged to challenge values and knowledge, everything that is taken for granted within a certain discourse, for instance in their school discourse or their primary discourse. One way of doing this is to ask children what they want to change in school or at home, or what they think about different matters (for example, concerning the wolves’ preservation). Then we would see texts where the pupils construct political subjects that express their opinions on different issues. In other words, a literacy teaching aimed at access to dominant literacies needs to include genres that encourage and challenge children to construct their views on different matters and on how they want to change things.

Conclusively, we believe that if schools are serious about designing a literacy teaching that aims at giving pupils access to higher studies, working life and democratic life as adults, it is important that pupils encounter a variety of genres in school. Both genres we have talked about are dominant forms in society, but so too are genres that allow diversity, that is, that allow children and young people to express their experiences from their primary discourses and points of views on different matters. We contend that it is important for children to have experienced having agency – that they know how to express their views and to be listened to. Experiencing agency can also be understood as experiencing being positioned as a political subject; construing oneself as a political subject can be seen as a prerequisite for participating in democratic life. We also mean that it is important that teachers discuss what agency they encourage or hinder in their teaching. Even if classrooms will always be power-embedded social practices where teachers are given more power than the children, we believe that discussions on power and agency in the classroom can open up for new power relations whereby children are given more agency than before. Thus, one way of doing this is to encourage children to use genres where they construct themselves as political subjects with experiences, knowledge, views, wishes and will. If pupils’ constructions of being a political subject are made in relation to their experiences and values of different societal discourses, including their primary discourse, that might provide a way round the access paradox. When pupils’ experiences from their
primary discourse are recognised as valuable (as they are asked for in school) and at the same time challenged, as other discourses can also be challenged (e.g. the school discourse), there could be possibilities for social change instead of a reproduction of the social order.

Notes
1 The literacy teaching studied in this article is part of a development project called “Learning to read through writing on computers”. This development project was started in order to improve children’s school results, especially those related to literacy skills. The head of education in this municipality has stated that it is urgent for the pupils in the municipality to improve their results in national tests. These tests are constructed to assess children’s skills in relation to national educational goals aiming at preparing children for higher studies, working life and citizenship.
2 The sub-genres of narratives in the material are: the ghost story, fairy-tale, social realism, horror story, success stories.

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