

Equity and models of literacy in a diverse world

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The autonomous and the ideological model of literacy, and their tentative effects on teachers' practices as well as on research will be discussed in this article, thus emphasizing the need for teaching children not only to read the word, but also the world. Cases where the possibility of implementing critical awareness from the very start of children's literacy trajectory is neglected will be discussed with reference to the Four Resources Model for literacy. The need of holistic perspectives in order to reject deficit discourses will be explicated. Finally the role of teacher education will be briefly illuminated. In the concluding comments the need for both practitioners and researchers to pay attention to the ideological model for literacy is stated.

Introduction

The point of departure in this article was to illuminate, question and discuss how different perspectives on literacy-learning may impact on how second-language learning students are included into the classroom practices, with respect to these students' language learning and their access to the curriculum at large. This is an important matter for all educators, as reading is a basic skill for all learning, thus being a foundational skill for all academic success no matter what the subject area is (Pugh, Pawan, & Antommarchi, 2000; Stanovich, 2000).

Sweden 2011 is a country characterised by diversity. In each and every one of the 290 Swedish municipalities teachers and preschool-teachers meet multi-lingual and children with diverse backgrounds, of whom many have another language than Swedish as their first language. Communicative competency and reading- and writing skills are key components in our society. As indicated above, reading and writing skills help children to academic success and make them able citizens in a society characterised by communication in a range of modes and media. This net-working society of ours put high demands on communications skills in both speech and writing. The demands on educationists are high to perform their uttermost in order to assist our children in their learning so that they can leave the educational system fully prepared to proceed on to their adult lives. In Sweden an overarching aim has been that all children should be included in the educational system, so that they can optimise their achievement regardless of background factors such as ethnicity, language background or social background (Tallberg Broman, Reich Rubenstein, & Hägerström, 2002). Evidently, this is a vision that hardly is apt to describe school practices the way they turn out in real life. In fact, the differences between high-achieving and low-achieving Swedish schools are increasing, in accordance with an increasing gap between the poorer and the better-off residential areas in Sweden (Skolverket, 2009). If the full potential of literacy as a tool for empowerment is to be developed, it is crucial to observe that the discourses children are grown up with do not prepare them for school activities in the same motto (Cummins, 2000, 2007; Heath, 1983).

Cummins (2000) describes how the clash between school codes and everyday-language use may cause great difficulties for many children. Some of the immigrant children grow up in homes with illiterate parents and/or parents who do not speak Swedish. The importance of early literacy activities is known since long by researchers around the globe (Beck, & McKeown, 2001; Dickinson, & Smith, 1994; Gibbons, 2002; Samuelsson, Byrne, Quain, Wadsworth, Corley, Defries, et al., 2005; Sénéchal, & LeFevre, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, the importance of code knowledge, including not only knowledge about script code, but also the communicative codes and discourses need further attention as language learning and literacy learning are complex matters. The discrepancies stemming from the different backgrounds children have may, thus, be addressed in terms of different discourses which affect their conditions for learning (cf. Au, & Raphael, 2000). One may describe the situation in terms of a more distinct focus on the need for rhetorical flexibility (Ravid, & Tolchinsky, 2002). In a Swedish study of eight grade-three classes, over-achieving in reading, and with a majority of the students having another first language than Swedish, pragmatic aspects of reading were found intertwined with other dimensions of reading such as syntax, vocabulary and phonology, thus linking the literacy events to the variability that applies to all language domains (Damber, 2009). All communicative situations offer choices and in a school context some choices may be described as more prestigious than others (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002). The burning question is whether all students are offered such choices.

Gee (1996) makes a distinction between the literacy activities in the classroom, such as conversations, stories, essays and so forth, as being discourses with a lowercase *d*. However, we may not stop there as these discourses always are included into a larger discourse on a societal level, the Discourses with an upper-case *D*. The poignant discourse in this context is about all the deficit discourse (cf. Kubota, 2004). Residential areas with a large proportion of immigrant citizens are repeatedly depicted in Swedish media as being stigmatised areas (cf. Bunar, 2001). Several dissertations underpin both students' and teachers' impressions of their schools as being perceived as problem areas, either by themselves or by the surrounding society (Fridlund, 2011; Runfors, 2003; Torpsten, 2009). The soil where the deficit discourse gets nourishment is thereby described. The major problem is, however, that the second-language learners get appointed as low achievers, which is something that must be taken into consideration, as teachers' expectations and students' perceptions of stereotype threat affect students' possibilities of optimal achievement (cf. Schmader, & Johns, 2003).

Literacy: Reading the word but also reading the world

Firstly, as indicated in the introductory part, literacy is a major predictor of academic success, which is also indicated in large-scale international comparative surveys (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2004). The connection between literacy skills and equity in the society is evident for everyone, thus, it is emphasising the importance of scrutiny of schools' literacy practices, both from theoretical and practitioners' perspectives. Within the field of literacy research we deal with two major types of studies; on the one hand there are large-scale survey studies which provide data upon which it is possible to make generalisations and on the other hand there are smaller, qualitative

studies which focus context-bound aspects of literacy- learning and development. All in all they are covering literacy and learning, cognitive approaches to literacy, social practice approaches as well as literacy as text. My conviction is that both types of studies serve their purpose. However, there is a need to bridge the gap between practice and research. We also need to create conditions for critical and emancipatory perspectives (Ercikan, & Roth, 2006; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In other words, we need both the quantitative and the qualitative studies in reading research in order to be able to view literacy from two quite different perspectives, namely according to the *autonomous model of literacy* and the *ideological model of literacy* (Street, 1995).

A historical view of the development of theories of reading, gives some perspectives on the changing definitions of reading. In the beginning of the 20th century reading instruction was prescriptive in nature, according to the prevalent reading theories and meaning was seen as residing with the author (Straw, 1990). Literacy was described as a conduit, transferring meaning from the author to the reader. Letter-sound correspondences and word recognition, all separate reading sub-skills, were the skills promoting reading acquisition (ibid.). The ultimate purpose with the act of reading was reproduction of the author's ideas. Memorisation guaranteed that "banking" of skills and knowledge was performed (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1987). This is the view of literacy often referred to as the autonomous model of reading, linked to the idea of language as a self-contained symbolic system (Au & Raphael, 2000; Street, 1995). In terms of tentative linkages to Discourses (cf. Gee, 1996) there are, however, severe implications to this view of literacy, according to Heath and Street (2008):

From the perspective of social theories of power, this model of literacy disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions and presents literacy's values as neutral and universal (p. 103).

If, on the other hand, reading as viewed as participation in socially, culturally and historically constructed practice, is a function of literacy as cultural capital where knowledge and power are entangled, "[s]igns and symbols are not innocent" (Heath & Street, 2008, p.20). In this wider definition of literacy, which Street (1984) denoted the ideological model of literacy, space is created to include the reader's prior experiences of the world, social identifications, attitudes, and the surrounding culture and society, as contributors to the outcome of the negotiations of meaning. Most importantly, different constructions of meaning are given space. Language, identity and culture are all seen as dynamic entities and the employment of the plural form, literacies, allows for critical framing of the relationships between school and marginalised learners' literacy activities (Au & Raphael, 2000; Straw, 1990). Thus, as cultural practices vary from context to context, the ideological view of literacy "offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 103), as attention is given to the fact that all individuals have their different literacy histories, including family, social and cultural background.

An important question is whether the employment of the autonomous model in educational practice may lead to a decline in the children's interest if they do not perceive the activities carried out within the realms of the classroom discourse, as

meaningful or valued (cf. Cummins, 2007; Heath, 1983). According to proponents of the social constructivist view of literacy, studies of practice cannot avoid transactional perspectives on reading development if the important social, emotional, and cultural factors, intertwined and interdependent with the cognitive factors at work in the ongoing learning processes in a classroom setting, are to be taken into account (Sfard, 1998). Reading is and will always be a question of understanding oneself and the surrounding world. Learning to read is to meet the world in ways that will change one's realms of reference. Reading may not only mean meeting the word, but also meeting the world in new conditions for critical awareness.

The four reader resources model

Where and at what age critical awareness of the meaning of text comes in is a major question to take a stand to. Swedish, as a language, is a rather transparent language, in comparison with opaque languages like, for example, English where the sounds, the phonemes correspond to the letters, that is, the graphemes (Furnes & Samuelsson, 2010). The issue of phonological awareness is much discussed in Sweden and the importance of phonological awareness at an early age in order to facilitate the process of learning to read is well known by both teachers and preschool-teachers. In a study of 39 preschool teachers' work, conducted in southern and northern Sweden a pattern of quite well-planned and regular work with phonological awareness emanated (Damber, in press). The purpose of the study was to examine the preschool teachers' work with the different aspects of linguistic awareness with a particular focus on the preschool teachers' read-alouds. However, the linkages between reading aloud and work with language and development of general knowledge were found to be very weak. Letter sounds and solitary words were worked with, but the connection to reading text, and learning from reading (or listening to) text was found to be very weak. Reading most often took place in connection to lunch, referred to as 'reading rest', where few questions interrupted the reading and no follow-up dialogues took place, even though a plentitude of studies have proved that those are the occasions where both language learning and general learning take place (Beck, & McKneown, 2001; Dickinson, & Smith, 1994; Sénéchal, & LeFevre, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) The strong focus on phonological awareness may be seen as very helpful to those children who grow up in homes where the school codes are implemented already in the family, and to those kids who have understood what reading is really about, that it is the meaning-making that is at heart of the business. However, we ask ourselves if there are reasons to broaden the perspectives on literacy development to make also preschool-practices into language and literacy cradles, where also children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds will have the best opportunities to step into the literate world? Despite our finding that reading aloud primarily was carried out as a sedative activity, with the overarching purpose to put the children to rest, we wonder what happened to the other aspects of linguistic awareness.

The well known *Four Reader Role/Resources Model* describes the reader in the roles not only in the one of a decoder, but also as the text user, the text participant and the text analyser (see Freebody, & Luke, 2003). The social and cultural aspects of literacy practices are emphasised just as much as the technical side of reading in this model,

which qualifies the model as apt for inter-cultural learning environments, where children with all kinds of backgrounds interact and relate to each other on equal conditions (Eklund, 2003). No universal method for literacy acquisition is advocated as the aim is to provide a model allowing trial-and error approaches for the teacher or preschool-teacher to literacy, in his or her own classroom, thus allowing sensitivity to those children's needs. According to Freebody and Luke (*ibid.*) the model may be used:

for weighing, critiquing and balancing the claims of arts and sciences of pedagogy and literacy education. It does not set out to refute or disprove scientific claims about, for example the efficacy of phonics instruction, or the need for comprehension instruction, or the developmental significance of explicit knowledge of grammar. Instead, it sets out to situate and use these and other claims to, both against each other and within a framework that asks how and in what ways the practices and 'roles' yielded by such models might together make up a literacy that is viable and powerful in current economies, institutions and cultures. (Freebody & Luke, 2003, p. 56).

No child will ever turn literate without taking on the role of the decoder. However, the other roles also have to be paid attention to. We have the role of the functional text user who knows how to adapt language use and text structure according to the situation, the recipient(s), and the communicative mode. Participation in texts demands "understanding and composing meaningful written, visual and spoken texts in ways that connect texts' meaning systems to people's available knowledges", to make meaningful inferences from those connections possible (Freebody & Luke, 2003, p. 56). In addition, analysing text is about manipulating the text and "understanding and acting on the knowledge that texts are not transparent windows on the world, that they are not ideologically natural or neutral, that they represent particular views and silence others, influence people's ideas; and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel hybrid ways" (*ibid.*, p. 57). Importantly, these roles develop in parallel, which puts the literacy nurturing in preschool in a prime position on educationists' agenda. Thus, the pre-understanding of what print really is, the purpose of print, and the perceptions of who is invited into the readers' community, emerge as crucial areas of interest in the early phases of literacy acquisition. Evidently classroom codes, clarity in teacher talk and preschool teachers' and teachers' ability to communicate their aims and expectations also emanate as important areas of development. It very much boils down to the practitioners' attention to the different conditions for literacy development that children have. There is no room for taken-for-granted assumptions of students' abilities to perform in school, if the deficit discourse is to be rejected. However, children's critical awareness, whilst engaging in meaning-making, should not be postponed, but initiated as an element of literacy learning from the start.

Examples of how lack of holistic approaches may impair children's learning conditions

In the case of reading research, socioeconomic background, often appears as a stronger predictor of reading performance, than does language-background (Skolverket, 2003; Van der Slik, Driessen & de Bot, 2006). Firstly, this is a methodological problem, as the factors interdependent with socioeconomic background factors, are hard to isolate. Secondly, the characteristics of effective schools have proved difficult to implement, and work aimed at improving school effectiveness often fail (Levin, 1995). In other words, we have knowledge, on a general level, about how schools should be, but how to transform practice according to those criteria, in the local context, is a mission dependent also on other knowledge. An understanding of those particular individuals and their historical roots, in that particular context, is needed (Ercikan & Roth, 2006). A third issue is which effects large-scale studies might have, regarding marginalised learners. Will the heterogeneity among the second-language-learners get visible, as second language-learners, who do well, still belong to a category of students, performing at lower levels, than their peers who have been brought up in families where the dominant language is spoken?

This phenomenon is apparent in Sweden, where a substantial number of refugees and asylum seekers arrive every year. Will the variance among individuals get attention, or will the trend appoint this category of learners as a collective suffering from deficits (Bernard, 2004; Giroux, 2001; Kubota, 2004)? In this article predominantly Swedish examples have been chosen to illustrate these phenomena. Thus, the macro-level context is similar for all studies referred to. However, the phenomenon of viewing children with diverse backgrounds as a homogenous group is found also in studies from other parts of the world (Au & Raphael, 2000). This categorisation of students on a general level, may give way for certain ways of thinking and talking about all non main-stream students, thus contributing to the maintenance of a discriminatory deficit discourse. In an earlier mentioned study of grade-three students' reading achievement in Stockholm schools the statistics regarding the total sample of 1092 classes revealed a pattern with no less than 47% of the students in 94 under-achieving classes being students with another first language than Swedish. However, in a smaller study, based on the same data material, eight overachieving-achieving classes were identified with a major part of the students having diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and by use of also qualitative methods an example of culturally sensitive pedagogy, with language-developing practices across the curriculum could be described and presented (Damber, 2009).

Such pedagogy is, however, not always what the children meet. In a study of interactions between adults and children in eight families of Turkish origin and seven families of Swedish origin during shared reading, very different interactional patterns were found (Nauclér, 2003). The Swedish children were urged to engage as active listeners asking and answering questions to the text, interactional patterns similar to those the children later met with in school, whereas the children with a Turkish background were socialised as listeners. In preschool the differences between the interactional patterns got even more pronounced, as the preschool teachers interacted

with the Swedish children, but left the children of Turkish origin as passive listeners. All the children later cracked the alphabetic code in school, but in spite of good decoding skills and knowledge of advanced storytelling grammar, the children of Turkish origin did not reach the same levels of reading comprehension as the children who had grown up in “all-Swedish” families, as a result of the lack of ownership of the Swedish school codes (ibid.).

Our present study of preschool-teachers’ work with listening-comprehension strategies and meaning-making in connection with reading aloud, indicates that the possibilities of socialising children into the educational system from the very start in pre-school, are not being taken advantage of by a majority of the preschool-teachers we studied. ‘Reading-rest’ is certainly not what is needed. Instead the children need teachers and preschool-teachers with profound knowledge of literacy, second-language learning and inter-cultural encounters. So how are these issues dealt with by teacher educators?

Where are inter-cultural issues on teacher educators’ agenda?

Recent studies of how intercultural issues are handled within the realms of teacher education do, in fact, reveal rather depressing findings (Carlsson, 2008; Carlsson & Rabo, 2008). Carlsson and Carlsson and Rabo describe a lack of dialogue between teacher educators when it comes to diversity and how different theoretical perspectives are handled. Instead they depict a situation with parallel monologues. Thus, a continuous development is hampered and the lack of challenge of existing perspectives is described by Carlsson (2008) as follows:

When other perspectives than one’s own are highlighted this is often done without comparisons; an additive view stands out. One thing is added to the other without any real integration or comparison. (Carlsson, 2008, p 220, my translation)

This situation may be compared with the situation within literacy research at large, where second-language learners and inter-cultural aspects of literacy-learning often are left aside as they are not part of main stream literacy interests (to teach the students the technical aspects of decoding). There are researchers who claim that many teachers perceive inclusive practices are difficult to arrange, thus, contribute to the creation of excluding practices, where the second-language learners also physically are separated from the rest of the class (cf. Fridlund, 2011; Torpsten, 2008). The children who arrive in Sweden as second-language learners learn the new language and develop understanding of the culture around the clock. In all subjects. Therefore, the need for all teachers to possess basic knowledge of second-language development and the questions, possibilities and challenges inter-cultural encounters actualise is burning, including also value-related issues.

Lorenz (2010) emphasise the need for teachers to spend more time to deepen their knowledge about values and value conflicts in order to optimise learning conditions in the classroom. According to the leading educationist in Sweden, Kroksmark (1997) the teachers’ awareness of the students’ life world and experiences and students’ ways of

understanding and acquiring new knowledge is fundamental and involves conscious didactic choices from the teachers as intercultural competency involves more aspects than only the communicative competency. The teachers need to move from ethnocentric perspectives to ethno-relative perspectives where the own culture is seen as one of many different cultures in order to develop intercultural competency. Thus, reflection and reconsideration of former positions emanate as central processes for teachers' development of intercultural sensitivity, implying in-service education and teacher education are key elements (Lorentz & Bergstedt, 2006). It is also important for educationists to pay serious attention to the fact that going to school in a new country is not only a question of language, even though language development, in the best of worlds, should be enhanced by all teachers, as every topic area has its own language domain. It is a question about human encounters, of knowledge and about equity. Is it not time to forward these important questions further up on the agenda?

Conclusions

My conclusions are that several steps need to be taken, on different levels, to enhance classroom and preschool practices where language minorities are recognised as being part of mainstream. Practitioners as well as researchers need to gather their tools and become more open to inter-cultural perspectives, both regarding language aspect as well as other more general aspects. We all need to realise that Sweden today is a country characterised by diversity.

Importantly, literacy researchers need to pay attention to new findings from other fields than their own, in order to build up knowledge and strategies that are useful in a diverse society. It can no longer be that the different aspects of literacy and its nurturing are restricted to phonological awareness alone, even if this aspect will be equally important in the future. A diverse society demands focus also on the other aspects of linguistic awareness, where children's critical awareness may not be forgotten.

In 2000, Au and Raphael wrote an article, "Equity and literacy in the next millennium", where a similar discussion to this one is carried out. Now we are in the next millennium, but still many Swedish schools struggle with too narrow conceptions of literacy and lack of inter-cultural perspectives. When paying respect to findings referred to in this article, the need for teachers to reject the deficit discourse in order to encounter students with diverse backgrounds with high demands and high expectations is made clear (Damber, 2009; Eklund, 2003; Fridlund, 2011; Nauc ler, 2003; Runfors, 2003; Torpsten, 2009). There is also a need for preschool teachers and teachers to pay respect to the different communicative codes those children may have, to ensure that their strengths are further enhanced, and also to ensure that the Swedish classroom codes are made accessible to all children, irrespective of their cultural background (Cummins, 2000; Nauc ler, 2003). In particular, the need of active interaction needs to be observed, as learning to read and comprehend text should involve a multitude of negotiations of meaning, if children with diverse backgrounds are to develop optimal understanding of the content (Gibbons, 2002; Street, 1995). Thus, the ideological model of literacy has the potential to bring about the inter-cultural and critical

perspectives which are needed if equity is to become something more than just a vision. With broader frames of reference, including both quantitative and qualitative aspects of literacy intertwined in the process of becoming literate, and belief in the capacities of the children, there is hope to build inclusive literacy practices, in which children get the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge needed for becoming citizens with adequate tools to meet the demands of the future society.

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