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Library and school partnership on the move - a study of second language learners' early literacy development

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Abstract

A study of eight multicultural suburban Swedish classes forms the backdrop of an analysis of the role of the library in students' development towards becoming skilled readers. In-depth interviews with five teachers and one librarian involved in the classes provide empirical data, even though background information was collected with mixed research methods. The librarian's narrative is the primary source of data in this article. The children´s educational trajectory from the preschool class to third grade is in focus. The present meta-analysis highlights the role of the library and the librarian, with respect to linkages made to the children's overall literacy development. As a tool for analysis critical literacy theory was used, thus extending the influence of the librarian´s participation beyond the actual literacy practice, to the surrounding society. The results indicate that the library played a vital role in several ways, for teachers and students as well as for the parents. The collaboration between the librarian and the teachers started with the librarian having book talks with the children. However, she became a participant in the team's planning and follow-up activities, linking the worlds in and out of school.

Keywords

library, book flood, second language learners, elementary school, critical literacy.

Introduction

In today's society literacy skills are more or less a necessity for survival, both in the digital world and in the real world (Barton, 2012; Findahl, 2013). For decades we have been aware of the linkages between literacy skills, educational success and later work (Dockrell et al., 2011; Ricketts, Sperring & Nation, 2014).

However, test results such as PISA (as measurement of literacy achievement) may turn the focus on results instead of the learning processes. This type of evaluation may create instrumental educational policies, instead of discussions on how literacy education should be carried out and with what aims, as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Developments (OECD) has as its primary aim to promote marketization within the OECD where adjustment of national curricula to PISA standards would favour such competition (cf. Sjøberg, 2014; Uljens, 2007).

Broadfoot (1996) has in line with Bourdieu's (1995) theories discussed how test results may indicate the distribution of top rank positions in society to already privileged groups, whereas less attractive positions may be left to less privileged groups, as tests may transfer an illusion of being objective tools for the sorting. When assessment ends in advantages to students from homes with sustainable cultural capital, social reproduction may be the result. Against this background it is important to highlight the second language learners' literacy development from several angles and perspectives, in particular their engagement in reading, if life-long learning perspectives are to be paid respect to. Therefore, the emphasis in this article is on qualitative aspects of literacy practices in an elementary school context, and students' test results were primarily used as tools for selecting which classes to target.

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For immigrant children, who learn in their second language, both language and literacy skills take on a shibboleth function as gate-keepers to higher education and integration into society (cf. Cummins, 2007). It is in this context that the potential function of the library will be discussed. The aim of this article is to highlight how libraries and librarians may take on the role of a link between the local community and the school. In a low-income, multicultural, linguistically diverse suburb of the Swedish capital, Stockholm, eight classes were studied over a three year period. Reading comprehension test results, survey data and in-depth interviews with teachers, librarian and preschool teachers provided the data to a former study (see Damber, 2010; 2012). The results revealed that these eight classes were performing at much higher levels than one could expect with respect to their parents' educational and income levels. In this meta-analysis the function of the library and the cooperation between the teachers and the librarian is highlighted to illustrate how the library may create a space for integration and become a contact area for both speakers of diverse mother tongues and the Swedish society.

Libraries as a Space for Literacy Learning

Much focus in research is spent on how teachers teach and students learn to read and write within the walls of the classroom. Many studies also investigate how teachers may assist cognitive obstacles delaying students' reading development. In this article, however, engagement in reading and identity are given primary attention. Thus, the cognitive processes of learning to read will render less attention than engagement in reading and access to the literacy practices both in and out of school (cf. Janks, 2010). According to Hedemark (2011), the library may offer a space for reading, without the control and evaluation of teachers. Dressman formulates the potential of the library as "classrooms are fundamentally spaces devoted to literacy as work, and libraries are fundamentally spaces devoted to literacy as the pursuit of personal desire" (1997, p. 161). In the following account of a collaborative project between the school and the library the line between the arenas became blurred, where both pragmatic literacy learning and joyful reading took place alongside intercultural work with integrational aims (cf. Sandin, 2011). However, the library stands out as the literacy arena where individual purpose totally dominated as motivation for reading.

Literacy Learning – an Autonomous or an Ideological Enterprise?

As indicated above, the technical aspects of literacy learning are described and analyzed in numerous studies. Kamil, Afflerbach and Moje (2011) describe the situation during the 1990's as a situation characterized by antagonism between phonics and whole language advocates - the cognitive perspective advocating a bottom-up perspective on literacy learning starting with teaching children how to combine letters with sounds and proceeding with words and whole sentences, and the whole language perspective advocating meaning-making as the starting point from which the elaborations with sounds and letters then took off. In the multidisciplinary research field of New Literacy Studies reading and writing are described as situated, social practices which are influenced not only by students' cognitive abilities, but also by social relations, the individual's and society's literacy history, values, power structures etcetera (Barton, 2007; Schmidt and Gustavsson, 2011; Street, 1995, 2003). This view of reading also encompasses multimodal texts and digital tools (cf. New London Group, 1999).

Even though the technical aspects of literacy learning cannot be overlooked in a school context, the actual starting point of the development towards literacy begins when the child realizes that text represents meaning (Bialystok, 2007). A narrow view of literacy as acquiring the technical skills of reading seen as an autonomous activity increases the risk of a skills focus where the reading experiences are reduced to decontextualized drills without content (Street, 1995).

To optimize learning a context for learning should be created, so that the students may use and understand words in function (Hall, 2013). Both fact and fiction can provide the low-frequent, domain specific vocabulary that will enrich the students' understanding of the world, interpersonal relations and other people's conditions of living. With Street's (1995) terminology an ideological view of reading

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then dominates such learning contexts. The reading enterprise, thus, has a clear function in a child´s understanding.

The act of reading and the content being read is, according to the ideological view of literacy, hard to separate. According to Gee (2008) the content has to be perceived as meaningful so that the reader may relate it to real-life dialogues, activities and decisions. Learning, thus, turns into a cultural process where it takes place embedded in a context. Furthermore, becoming a reader is more than acquiring skills, as the identity formation is closely connected to the enterprise where students see themselves as readers of certain texts. From a critical literacy perspective, purposeful reading experiences have the power to affect the reader's view of the world, so that the reading also turns into acting and transforming the "real world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Janks, 2010).

Parents Involvement as a Success Factor

How educational levels in the home, and how parental engagement in children's learning affect educational outcomes are well known facts (Baker, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1995; Phillips, 2011). When parents are engaged in their children's literacy learning from start, through the initial years of schooling, the achievement gap in average literacy performance between children in high-educated families and children in less educated families becomes almost non-existent (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006). Such findings clearly point out that efforts to close opportunity gaps must go beyond learning that happens only in school and reach out to engage the family as well. In this context the library, as a space for parents and children to share interests and develop them together, has a lot of potential.

Method

Background

The present article originates, as earlier indicated, from a larger quantitative study encompassing 1,092 grade three classes (children aged from 9.17 to 10.17 years) in Stockholm, using teacher questionnaires, student questionnaires and reading comprehension tests. As the role of the teacher and the conditions in the classroom influencing students' reading results were to be the focus, socioeconomic status (SES) and language factors were statistically controlled. However, significant differences in factors that could be influenced by teachers then, more or less, failed to appear, even though the use of authentic literature was indicated in the targeted classes, as well as activities linked to the reading of fiction. Thus, a qualitative follow-up study was carried out to explore the influence of the classroom practice on the students' reading development in more detail.

Eight classes in a low income, multicultural district (with a total of 68 classes) were selected for this follow-up study. These eight classes were identified as achieving at higher levels in reading comprehension tests than could be expected in regard to SES and language factors. Statistical analyses of variance were carried out between these eight high-achieving classes and a control group of 100 classes matched on SES and language. However, as the statistical tools in the foregoing study had given signals of being quite blunt when it came to building an understanding of the mechanisms at work in the literacy practices of the classrooms and vital questions about teachers' roles remained from the initial study, in-depth interviews were carried out with three teachers, one librarian, one administrator and one preschool teacher to shed further light on what was happening in the classrooms of the eight targeted classes (Damber, 2010). Personal contact with the schools in the statistical sample revealed that the targeted classes were all involved in literature-based programs (see, for example, Clay, 1998; Elley, 1991). Data also indicated frequent library visits in these classes.

In-depth Interviews

The data generated by an in-depth interview with the librarian provide material for this meta-analysis, with the statistical results and the teacher interviews used as a backdrop. An interview guide was structured thematically in terms of such matters as collaborative aspects, parental contact and use

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of methods for literacy teaching. The interview guide was used to check that all themes were covered. In order to make sure that answers were interpreted according to the interviewees' intentions, follow-up questions were subsequently asked (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). The interviews (on average 1.5 hour long) were recorded, transcribed and translated into English by the author. The teachers' and the librarians' narratives provided data for the analyses carried out for the purpose of the meta-analysis. The informants were informed of the purpose of the study, and knew that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were guaranteed anonymity.

Results

In the following excerpts from the interview with the librarian (L) she gives her account of how the collaborative project started.

Shifting Views of Literacy

Several of the teacher interviews revealed that in the semester the project started signals from the school district administration had shown that the students' reading levels were alarmingly low in this particular area, thus indicating that the students' reading acquisition was far from satisfactory. Therefore the decision to start working with literacy in the preschool class was made. An administrator interested in Reading Recovery (see Clay, 1998), arranged an in-service course for preschool teachers and these teachers decided to try out the ideas they encountered. The teachers asked the librarian to carry out book talks, where she presented books to the children and talked with them about the books. She describes how she, at this initial stage, was somewhat reluctant to having book talks with preschool class children: "… six-year-olds… I mean… they can't even read!" Nevertheless she decided to do what she was asked to do:

> L: So, I knew about them [the teachers and the preschool teacher], that they were really engaged teachers and preschool teachers. And that they have introduced a new model [for literacy learning]. The elementary teachers went down to… went down? Well, to the preschool class once a week and then when they [the children] had finished preschool class as six-year-olds, in grade one, then the teacher accompanied them and took that class.

Soon she realized that the children really appreciated her book talks, and she joined the course Reading Recovery that the teachers were taking. The librarian experienced 'hands-on' the potential in the children's engagement with print. In the way the librarian formulates her first experiences of the project a remnant of her initial perception of the nature of literacy is indicated. The teachers "went down" to the preschool class, and the librarian hesitates when she realizes the implications of what she just said. Learning takes place in school, not in the preschool class. She also recalls how she first thought that you can't introduce literature to children who "can't even read". Thus, literacy equalled the skill of decoding. But a shift in the view of literacy took place. The perception of learning to read as a strictly linear process was transformed and the children were stimulated to engage in meaning-making, no matter what the their language or literacy levels were:

> L: (…) when they [the children] read, or dramatized or made art or crafted objects, they were to take on the role… the role of what they were to illustrate!

Apparently, making meaning was no longer exclusively about combining letters with sounds (cf. Barton, 2007; Street, 1995). The teachers also gave account of this shift in viewing literacy and how the teachers' ways of working with print awareness was changed, when decoding drills were exchanged into experiencing print in the real world, which the following excerpt from a teacher interview illustrates:

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> We went to the shopping centre and copied the signs. They [the children] could write exactly what they wanted. Just to write a word. . . no matter if you could read or not. To make them aware of the fact that those letters form a word that means something . . . When they were lying there on the ground writing words . . . they were approached by people who asked them what they were doing. And they told them that they were writing words. 'Well, that's good work' and things like that were the responses. They were acknowledged.

The excerpts above illustrate how these teachers, as well as the librarian, no longer solely focused on the technical skills involved in learning to read. Reading was no longer seen as an autonomous skill. Instead, the young students were encouraged to participate in this social practice, which was situated, encompassing social relations, placing the children's meaning-making, also with multi-modal expressions in the first room (Barton, 2007). With Street's (1995) words a turn towards an ideological view of literacy had taken place.

A Common Denominator in a Diverse Group of Students

The adults let the children's experiences form the point of departure for literacy learning. Both the librarian and the teachers read aloud on a daily basis as there were such discrepancies between the children's reading skills, partly depending on how much time the students had spent in Sweden. Therefore, multimodality was used to create access to the communicative arena and oral interaction was given priority (cf. Janks, 2010).

As the librarian was included in planning, execution and follow-up of common projects, she introduced the idea of exploring a common denominator to engage the diverse group of children in a common learning project. The idea originated from an in-service course on diversity that she had attended:

> L: About angels (…) what they mean to us in our every-day lives. I mean… we are surrounded by them. 'Oh, that looks like an angel!' There are flowers named after angels, texts, paintings… We actually are surrounded by them, even if we don't think about it. (…) We realized that some angels are the same in Islam, Christianity and Judaism. (…) It was all about a common denominator.

The exploration of what angels are in different cultures started with the children asking at home what "angels" their parents knew about. The children returned with numerous tales of different angels. The idea of reinforcing teacher competence with competence from other professional groups was sustained by inviting art educators to the school. In addition, the class was taken to museums to look at sculptures and paintings depicting angels. The librarian gathered books about angels in the library. The children were also interviewed by the teachers, one by one about their individual perceptions of what an angel was. Finally the workshops were carried out in which the children were given the opportunity to create an angel, and write about it, if the child could master writing. These angels, partly reflecting the children's background (Vietnamese, Kurdish, Iranian, Eritrean, etc.), were all given their individual touch to resemble each child's conception of an angel.

Firstly, the learning project reveals an experience-based approach to learning and literacy, in line with the ideological view of literacy (Barton, 2007; Street, 1995). Secondly, the meaning-making and the aim of the activities were generated by genuine interest, both regarding the students and the adults. None of the involved individuals actually knew anything about the conceptions of angels in other parts of the world. Thirdly, the project was not culturally biased, as no certain "norm" for how an angel should be perceived was advocated. In this respect the project demonstrates ´give-and-take´ in an authentic way. This authenticity is reflected in several ways in the literacy practice, not only by the use of authentic books, but also reflects a vision of learning for real purposes (cf. Janks, 2010). Furthermore, books were used, but the students work also reflects a multimodal approach to literacy (cf. New London

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Group, 1999). In using aesthetic expressions, both literate and still struggling readers could contribute to the outcome of the project on similar terms, when the results were presented at the library:

> L: The parents were assigned a task. To come and look at their children's art work at the exhibition here at the library. To visit the exhibition… and the library (…) That the parents… that they were part of…I believe that was part of the success of the project…that we managed to engage all of the parents.

Engaging Parents

The collaboration with parents served several purposes in these classes. On the one hand the teachers were engaged in their children's learning of literacy, as they were instructed by teachers to listen to their children's reading at home, even if the parents were illiterate or were not fluent in Swedish. But they could listen, and these children, developing their interim language, at the same time as they were learning to read, had to devote a lot of time to reading in order to catch up with their native peers. The pedagogical staff nevertheless managed to convey the idea of reading as an interactive enterprise, and the parents could support their children by discussing texts with them in the mother tongue (cf. Baker, 2003; Dearing et. al., 2006; Pillips, 2011). During parent meetings both the teachers and the librarian asked (or rather ordered) the parents to take their children to the library, also during vacations, so that the children would gain favourable conditions for keeping up reading levels out of school as well.

Perhaps of even larger importance, the library had also a function for the parents (cf. Sandin, 2011). The exhibition of the children's art work, mentioned above, was the first invitation to the parents to visit the library, with many more visits to follow. The library offered newspapers and books in different languages and the librarian took the opportunity to introduce reading resources in the parents' mother tongues. In the long run it turned out that the library became a place where both grown-up children and parents turned to in order to attain support with navigating Swedish bureaucracy (filling in forms, making applications for work etc.). For an immigrant, perhaps a refugee, institutions may be perceived with some scepticism. However, when the parents perceived their children's trust in the librarian, the parents felt that the librarian was someone to trust, someone who did not have any obligation to evaluate them.

Conclusion

The library turned out to be a major component in the process of opening up the school for parents and the local community, thus creating a foundation for cooperative work between parents, local community and teachers, to enrich each other and enhance children's development into bilingual, capable students.

The close relationship between the parents, the library and the school turned the library into an arena for literacy learning where the students could find books and read with the aim to voluntarily develop their interests and identity. The overlapping professional roles of being librarian or teacher may be seen as an injection for viewing the practice from different perspectives in times of transformation.

Access emerges as a key-word in this context. Access to reading materials, but also access to the identity of an individual included in a Swedish context, a library visitor who is familiar with the resources and expected behaviours in this institution (cf. Bourdieu, 1995). These students learned to view themselves as readers. To the students the library offered a sanctuary, a resting place, which supplied joyful experiences where no one had the intention to control or evaluate the reading experience (cf. Hedemark, 2011). In addition, the habitual visits to the library introduced the children to a "reading discourse" quite different from the discourse anchored in the educational system (Broadfoot, 1996). As young students, they learnt to read for life, not only experiencing reading as an instrumental

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skill necessary in the competition within the realms of educational system, even though reading skills were one of the outcomes of their socialization into readers.

For both students and parents the library became a link between Swedish society and the local community. Using Freire's wording (Freire & Macedo, 1987), the library offered possibilities for both reading the word and the world.

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