Meaning-Making and Early Literacy: A Future Challenge for Swedish Teachers and Preschool Teachers?

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ABSTRACT This article explores tentative links between findings from a study of how Early Literacy was nurtured in 40 Swedish preschool groups and another study focusing Student Teachers’ ability to perform text analyses of basals used for literacy learning. Our inquiries focused how meaning-making practices were implemented in preschools and how critical awareness was fostered within the preschools’ literacy practices. In addition, we wanted to build an understanding of how Student Teachers perceived the contents in basals, in order to highlight Student Teachers’ own capacity to read critically, so that teachers’ use of text-books fosters children’s critical awareness and challenges taken-for-granted perceptions of contents. 40 preschool teachers/preschool teacher training students made observations of read-alouds with the children during one week. The informants also wrote narratives where they described their practices, which enabled us to use both statistical descriptions and the informants perceptions as expressed in their own words as a basis for our analyses. The preschool-teachers indicated that both lack of knowledge of the importance of ‘talking text’ and lack of time made both read-alouds and follow-up activities very scarce. When 20 Student Teachers examined the contents of eight reading materials they arrived at very shallow analyses of the contents and discourses visible between the lines were seldom detected. Taken together these findings imply that critical awareness and meaning-making appears to be crucial development areas in both in-service training and teacher training, in particular, as the needs of children with diverse backgrounds may be neglected when meaning-making is not given first priority.

Key words: emergent literacy, preschool, critical awareness, meaning-making, read aloud, basals
Introduction

Sweden and Swedish schools were more or less monolingual and monocultural until the mid-20th century. Since that point, bilingualism and multicultural aspects became evident in research on education, reflecting the growing proportion of Swedish citizens with culturally diverse backgrounds. Today every fifth Swede has a foreign background. Research from the 1970s on students with diverse backgrounds and school success has primarily focused on two dominating areas—that of language and language development and that of immigrants’ encounters within Swedish society. Such studies predominantly focused on the subjects’ shortcomings and problems, and the Swedish educational settings and the teachers have appeared as background factors (Cederberg, 2006). Obviously students’ language difficulties have been of interest to researchers and, as side effect, deficits have been identified among the individuals. When combined with media reports of the problems in multicultural suburbs, a so-called Deficit Discourse has gained ground (Au and Raphael, 2000; von Brömssen, 2003; Kubota, 2004).

In this paper, the focus is on the teachers and the preschool and school practices. A huge range of studies have all underlined early language and literacy activities as critically important for children’s later school success (Collins et al., 2002; Sénéchal and Le Fèvre, 2002; Stanovich, 2000). Preschools’ and schools’ literacy practices may counteract the varying conditions for academic progress which children have, depending on their home circumstances (Samuelsson et al., 2005). However, educational institutions may both help or hinder children’s language and literacy development (Nauclér, 2003). This dual outcome applies to children who, for several reasons and in different ways, do not have the optimal conditions at home for language and literacy development. In other words, the early literacy environment that children experience at school is of great importance, in terms of equity as well as a linguistic point of view.

Dimensions in emergent literacy in preschool

Most Swedish children’s first encounter with institutionalised education is when they start preschool. Several studies reveal that early literacy nurturing has effects on children’s language and literacy development (Lundberg, 2006; McGee and Schickedanz, 2007; Obondo and Benckert, 2001). “The Four Reader Role Model”, described by Freebody and Luke (2003), provides a useful framework for understanding literacy development, from several different aspects. According to Freebody and Luke (2003), reading comprehension strategies can and should be
implemented from the very start of the learning-to-read process. While engaged in reading, children apply a variety of resources: he or she functions as a decoder, is semantically apt with competence as a text participator and text user, and develops his or her critical abilities. It is important to note that these roles are viewed as parallel development. This observation implies that the use of texts, the ability to be active in discussions about text, to realise the differences between fact and fiction, and the capacity to identify or position oneself in relation to narratives and texts is vital early training aspects of becoming literate, even if the technical aspects of learning to read evidently also are needed. It boils down to an early focus on the meaning-making processes (Edwards, 2009). This paper will address some major factors of importance for young children’s meaning-making capability.

**Academic codes**

First, it is important that teachers’ and researchers’ interest is not restricted solely to the understanding the alphabetic code. It is important they also focus on the acquisition of the “school codes” within the preschool or school walls. These behavioural codes need to be understood and applied by the children, if the children’s learning potential is to be maximised (Heath, 1983; Nauclér, 2003). For example, preschool teachers’ knowledge, or absence of such knowledge, about different cultural expectations in relation to children’s behaviour when listening to stories may either exclude the children with diverse backgrounds, or the teachers may consciously scaffold the children into active participation in effective meaning-making activities (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, children from cultures in which the listener’s role is to be quiet must be actively involved by the adults in the question-answer and discussion routines that characterise effective learning situations. Such activities are connected to read-alouds, or planned oral readings of stories or text excerpts which engage the listeners’ background knowledge and increase their comprehension skills in order to create a platform for the children’s development of critical thinking (Beck and McKeown, 2001; McGee and Schickedanz, 2007; Nauclér, 2003; Robbins and Ehri, 1994). Didactically planned activities contribute to the development of vocabulary, narrative structures, and world knowledge (Dickinson and Smith, 1994). In other words, children must acquire the alphabetic code as well as the school codes and discourses in a broader sense (Gee, 1996).
Meaning-making and/or phonological awareness?

Furthermore, a developed sense of phonological awareness is a foundation for cracking the alphabetic code. Numerous studies confirm the effectiveness of an early start in preschool with activities that enhance phonological awareness (Lundberg, 2006; Samuelsson et al., 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Bilingual children and second-language learners are equally dependent on phonological awareness (Ho and Bryant, 1997).

However, the moment the child realises that print represents meaning becomes the flash point for literacy learning (Bialystok, 2007). To enhance children’s further development of the meaning-making process, children need to be engaged in analytic dialogues which help them to identify the central ideas in the text. The adults who read aloud to the children need to face this challenge, even with very young children, since they are also perceptible of such challenges (i.e. their listening comprehension skills by far exceed their word recognition abilities in preschool) (Beck and McKeown, 2001). Effective read-alouds build on dialogues among the children and their adult educators before, during, and after the text reading (Beck and McKeown, 2001; Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; Robbins and Ehri, 1994). Active participation in dialogues and activities which engage the child create the necessary conditions for additional learning. It is in the dialogues the children experience the decontextualised language and the more abstract thinking that bridges the “academic language” that they will encounter in school. In particular, the children with diverse language backgrounds are in need of encounters with language that extend beyond the domains of everyday language (Cummins, 2000; Heath, 1983). The dialogues that are connected to read-aloud events are crucial for the children’s vocabulary development, thus strengthening one of the most important predictors for later reading success (Hart and Risley, 1995). However, it is not enough to invite children to participate in text dialogues if the positive effects from read-alouds are to be lasting. Systematic practice and support to predict what will happen, make inferences, and assess connections between different parts in the text is necessary (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; McGee and Schickedanz, 2007; Robbins and Ehri, 1994).

The didactics of reading aloud to children also involve effective use of the illustrations. The illustrations are not supposed to draw intentions from the meaning of the text, but should be used so that they enhance language development (Beck and McKeown, 2001).
Semantic and syntactic dimensions

The process of simply reading texts aloud does not have the desired effect on vocabulary development. When it comes to building vocabulary, specific activities that are targeted toward vocabulary development are required. The children need to personally use novel words in context and make them their own (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000). Apparently, both fiction and non-fiction may provide words to work with, as both offer low-frequency domain-specific vocabulary that helps to establish genre awareness.

Reading aloud is also important for a child’s development of syntactic awareness. Texts provide connected sentences that, in turn, create understanding on a meaningful level (Oakhill et al., 2003). In particular, second-language learners must be provided with opportunities to develop their morpho-syntactic abilities in order to develop their target language (Droop and Verhoeven, 2003). Studies indicate that very young children also make progress when they are actively supported by an adult (Gibbons, 2002).

Read-alouds and learning

Finally, an increase in world knowledge is a positive effect that emerges from the process of reading aloud to children. According to Cunningham and Stanovich (1993), the relationship between world knowledge and future reading comprehension may be described as circular. When formal literacy learning is introduced in school, the amount of knowledge that a child has about the world will predict how much he or she understands the material that was read. The more one reads, the more one will learn as textual understanding is enhanced. For the child to learn the difference between taking in information from a text and constructing meaning from central ideas in a text exemplify yet another challenge which will stimulate the cognitive development of the child. In best practices, the educator has the ability to anchor the new knowledge in the children’s existing background understanding (Beck and McKeown, 2001; Cummins, 2000).

As previously mentioned, however, several studies indicate that there is more or less no evidence to support the idea that reading aloud as such brings about positive effects for children’s language development or early literacy development regarding vocabulary development; insights of narrative structures; or the acquisition of the more complex grammatical structure of written language (Robbins and Ehri, 1994; Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Meyer et al., 1994). The absence of positive effects from read-alouds is
connected with preschool teachers’ tendency to read to the children and not with them. The positive effects from read-alouds, including language enhancement, increased vocabulary, growing world knowledge, and so forth, underpin the interest in how read-alouds are carried out in practice. The fact that the story-telling process may also bring about positive experiences of text, thus creating a platform for a future interest in reading literature, is also a crucial aspect of why preschool teachers’ reading practices deserve attention.

To conclude, there are many reasons why it is vital to read aloud to preschool children. The effects of read-alouds may be of both emotional and cognitive character, as well as transgressing to the social sphere and the formation of identity. There is a technical side of language and literacy acquisition, but the reader’s/listener’s prior experiences of the world, social identifications, attitudes, and the surrounding culture and society also contribute to the outcomes of a storytelling experience. Literacy may be seen as “reading” as well as participating in a culturally, historically, and socially constructed practice (Cummins, 2000; Gee, 2001). The four-reader role model supplies a tool for examining literacy practices from all of these different aspects (Freebody and Luke, 2003). It is important to note that the model is sensitive to the idea that no words or signs are innocent (Heath and Street, 2008). Further, according to Heath and Street (2008), when language, identity, and culture are seen as dynamic entities, there is also room for a critical framing of the relationships between educational activities and marginalized learners’ literacy activities. In my view, transactional perspectives on literacy development are needed as cognitive factors are interdependent with social, cultural, and emotional factors in all literacy events.

**Reading primers**

Against this background, preschool teachers’ knowledge about text and discourse analysis also gain interest in relation to how they organise the literacy activities and read-alouds in practice. What kinds of texts constitute children’s first encounters with print, when they learn to read themselves, after leaving preschool? Swedish research on reading primers is quite scarce and is shadowed by the amount of studies that focus on the technical aspects of literacy acquisition. However, text-analytic studies reveal that gender aspects and perspectives on diversity, as well as class perspectives, often leave much to be desired in terms of the way in which identities are constructed in the Swedish compulsory school readers (Eilard, 2008). Traditional gender roles are prevalent, and hetero-normative fostering is seldom questioned. The boys are active and industrious, often engaged in sports and outdoor activities, whereas girls’ personalities are often characterised by being
obedient, care-taking, and well-behaved. All-Swedish nuclear families dominate in the storylines in books. Further, especially in older books, all of the major characters are ethnical Swedes; thus the mono-cultural society that no longer exists is perpetuated. Immigrant subjects do appear in the texts, but only as minor characters. In the older books, national stereotypes such as the “Sami,” “the Oriental,” and “the African” appear as exotic elements. However, 21st-century books display similar stereotypes, amongst whom “the black macho guy” and the “veiled Muslim girl” clearly expose their roots in colonial discourses. Such stories that depict strangers do not invite readers to identify themselves with these characters because they are positioned far from the dominating white middle-class norm (Eilard, 2008). The stories in the textbooks often give the impression of being innocent tales about children’s classroom life. However, a closer look reveals that the stories often transmit double messages from which multiple meanings may or may not be constructed by the children. Obviously, there is a need to observe all four reader roles as described by Freebody and Luke (2003) from the first day in preschool, as the children’s frames of reference for their future meaning-making are being founded in preschool. Our inquiry seeks to determine whether critical awareness is on the agenda when preschool teachers read aloud to their children, as ideology operates in all texts, either through explicitly imbued values or through values embedded in the texts (Heat and Street, 2008).

Aims

The aim of this paper was to draw conclusions from two separate studies, which both highlight crucial aspects of emergent literacy and literacy development. An interest was also taken in how well equipped teachers and preschool teachers were to perform critical reading of texts, as educationists’ own awareness is a prerequisite for their way of using texts in ways that will challenge the children’s critical awareness. The two studies address different aspects of literacy nurturing in order to highlight important factors for equal and effective literacy learning for all children, as encompassed by Swedish institutionalised education, with a particular focus on literacy practices in preschool. Thus, this research works from two separate sets of questions. When studying preschool literacy practices, the guiding questions were:

- What features characterise literacy practices in preschools and how are meaning-making practices implemented in connection to read-alouds?

- How is children’s critical awareness fostered within the preschools’ literacy practices?
When studying student teachers, including those who specialise in preschool, the following questions guided the inquiries:

- What characteristics in early readers do the teacher students identify?
- Do student teachers expose abilities to problematise the contents in early readers?

Samples

Within the preschool study, 31 preschool teachers in in-service training and eight preschool teacher trainees at a teacher training university in southern Sweden were selected for participation. The informants were chosen for reasons of convenience because they took part in courses that were in progress when the data was being collected. The courses focused on reading, writing, and mathematics for preschool teachers. Both courses were administered by the Department of Humanities at the researchers’ universities. This procedure makes it hard to generalise the findings to a wider population, as the group only represented itself (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). However, the informants represented both rural and city areas, in the north as well as in the south of Sweden. Both young teacher trainees as well as preschool teachers with up to thirty years of working experience were included in the sample. To ensure consistency in the observations all the informants were trained how to use the observation schedules.

For the study of teacher trainees’ ability to problematise the contents of early readers, 24 teacher trainees, all of whom were studying to become K-6 teachers, were selected. Their selection was also based on convenience, but as in the sample described above, the students came from different geographical areas, as the course was offered as a distant course. The researcher gave the students in a teacher training course that focused on gender, class, and ethnicity the option to analyze first-grade textbooks as a task within the realms of the course. Twenty students accepted the offer.

All informants voluntarily agreed to participate in the studies after having been informed of the research purpose to provide scientific data. The informants’ anonymity was also guaranteed.

Methods

In the study of literacy practices, the informants were provided with an observation schedule to use during one week of work. They were directed to register how often read-alouds took place, the duration of such sessions, the number of children
in attendance at each, and the texts that were read. They were also asked to note whether or not follow-up activities occurred and, if so, the nature of the activities. They were also asked to record some brief notes about the atmosphere during the reading session and the kind of dialogues that took place during the actual reading of the story. In addition, the informants were asked to write a brief narrative about the literacy practices in their preschool, including information on how often phonics were practiced and other activities that were more catered towards enhancing the technical aspects of early literacy development occurred. All informants were given identical written instructions. The in-service training preschool teachers performed the data collection at their own preschools and the teacher trainees collected data during an in-service practice period.

The teacher trainees’ analysis of textbooks that were used for reading education was initiated during a lesson when the researchers presented the study to the students. The students were asked to analyse the textbooks that were used in the school where they spent their practice period. The students then worked in pairs on the analyses of two readers. They were told to read and reflect upon the contents of the books they selected. We emphasised the fact that this was not a project that was intended to designate different methods of learning to read; rather, the main focus was the moral values embedded in the textbooks. From the present course, the students were acquainted with the notions of gender/sex, ethnicity, and class, both theoretically and through a minor field study aimed at exploring how the issues of diversity and fundamental values were addressed in the educational practice of the school where their practical training occurred. In addition, the students read a dissertation (Assarsson, 2007) that illustrated how discourse analysis might be employed as a research method. To guide their analyses, we asked the students to describe and analyze the fundamental values and the image of Durkheim’s “ideal citizen” (Giddens, 1986) as they perceived the ideal citizen from the descriptions they would find in the basals they were examining. We urged them to capture the fundamental values as described in the pedagogic goal documents for the Swedish compulsory school system as well as the other attitudes, perceptions, and values that formed the individual’s belief-systems. In order to focus on the students’ reading of the textbooks, we provided the following question to guide their reading of the books: “How is the future ‘ideal citizen’ described in terms of his/her moral qualities?” The following questions were used to explicate what we were after: Tolerant? Responsible? Concerned about equality (with respect to ethnicity, class, and gender)? Understands values in cultural diversity? Concerned about all people’s equal rights? Ability to feel compassion and empathy for others, etc.? The students were assigned three weeks to complete their analyses. Our ambition was to collect the informants’ perceptions of the
contents in the reading primers, thus, making informants' narratives a suitable source of information. The student teachers’ perceptions of texts served as a backdrop for our interpretations of the data provided by the preschool teachers. All together, we were inspired by mixed methods research and we strived to make our research as naturalistic as possible, by combining the descriptive statistics (primarily frequencies and percentages) collected by the informants as participant observers, with the informants' narratives to get a deeper understanding of our findings (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Results

The findings of the preschool study will be presented first, then the results of students’ analyses of the textbooks that were used for reading acquisition will be reported.

The descriptive statistics showed a mean value of 6.2 (standard deviation 3.95), which indicates that reading aloud took place, on average, once or twice a week. In some preschools, the number of read-alouds was a lot higher, but the length of the read-alouds was then shorter. In the total sample, the participants reported that the preschool teachers most frequently read aloud for five to ten minutes. The participants’ narratives revealed that these read-alouds were regularly carried out as a routine after the children had had their lunch. The informants referred to this read-aloud session as “reading rest” and the major purpose of the read-aloud was to lull the children to sleep, or at least to make them lie down and rest. The majority of read-alouds were not a planned pedagogic activity, which was indicated by the fact that the children chose the book in 65% of the total number of the 243 read-alouds. The overarching purpose for reading to the children, apart from enabling them to rest, was to gather the group of children and to help them to transition to other activities after the reading. In other words, the read-aloud was most frequently used for disciplinary reasons.

Dialogues during the reading of the story occurred at 66% of the reading occasions. However, the informants’ narratives indicated that these dialogues were mainly restricted to short questions with a one- or two-word answer. A majority of the interactions during the read-alouds were constituted by a child asking for an explanation of an unknown word. The narratives indicated that the dialogues were only sparsely embedded in a context or linked to the children’s own experiences. Follow-up activities were very scarce. Follow-up dialogues after the reading occurred in only 27% of the reading occasions. Other kinds of follow-up activities, such as drawing pictures in relation to the story, occurred at 5% of the read-along occasions. The informants’ narratives created a distinct picture of practices where
follow-up dialogues were not part of the read-aloud routines.

The children’s access to books varied a great deal between the different preschools. Some preschools were well equipped with both fact and fiction, but some accounts revealed the existence of preschools with very few books and even one preschool without any books at all. The physical placement of the books also varied from being easily accessible to the children to locations so high on shelves that the children could not reach them. We found evidence that access to books encourages interest in reading books; for example, accounts from some of the preschools in sparsely populated parts of northern Sweden, where the library services must book buses to the most remote municipalities, indicated such a theory. The preschool teachers in such municipalities unequivocally gave accounts of an increased interest in listening to stories, when the book bus had paid a visit.

When it came to the practice of sub-skills of linguistic awareness, a quite different scenario provided accounts in the student teachers and preschool teachers’ narratives. Such activities were frequently carried out on a regular basis, primarily with the aim to stimulate the children’s phonological awareness. These activities had been planned by the preschool teachers in advance, the purpose was known by the pedagogues, and the way in which the activities were to be carried out had been a matter of thought and planning. In many of the informants’ narratives, phonological awareness was referred to as linguistic awareness. This confusion between different concepts will be discussed in the following section.

In a few accounts, (i.e. no more than 6% of the read-alouds), a similar pattern regarding thought and planning was found in relation to reading aloud. In those cases, we found that the read-alouds were not the solitary activities that they were in 94% of the cases. Instead the read-alouds were being conducted as a part of ongoing thematic work. On those occasions, the preschool teachers chose the reading material with respect to the children’s own experiences. On those occasions, it was also common that the preschool teachers made connections to the books and stories that they had previously read to the children. On all of those occasions, dialogues occurred during the actual reading and after it concluded. On those occasions, other follow-up activities also took place, and it was not unusual that the children themselves processed the contents of the story in spontaneous play when the planned activities had come to an end. That only happened after 8% of the read-alouds in the total sample. Thematic work carried out the importance of challenging children’s world views, as a learning activity also was included. These findings, which imply that the role of critical awareness only was observed in exceptional cases within our data material, will be discussed in the next section.

The findings of the study of student teachers’ ability to analyse first grade reading acquisition text material reveal that the critical reading of basals obviously
caused the teacher trainees’ problems. However, the need to read basals often required a critical stance, as some of the books that the teacher trainees analyzed were more than 20 years old. The oldest book was published in 1977; thus, it portrayed a monocultural Sweden with rigid gender roles. Of the other readers that were analyzed, 11 were first published in 1985. Further, five books were from 1995 and four were from 2003. Two of the remaining basals were from 2007 and one was published in 2008. The students perceived the out-dated gender roles, but the monocultural perspectives that were reflected in the early readers were not always detected.

In all of the 12 analyses that were performed by the students, gender aspects were commented upon; traditional gender roles were particularly prevalent in the oldest books. In early readers from the late 1990s and onwards, the students noted that gender roles were occasionally transgressed in the stories. However, the fact that strong girls often gained their status from being a boy’s best friend was not discussed.

The fact that social class only was discussed in three of the analyses indicates the difficulties the students faced when attempting to interpret and verbalise how class was depicted in the text books. However, the students wrote that they perceived a middle class norm in the books, but only in three cases were attempts made to analyze how that impression was created. Parents’ jobs and the sort of housing that the main characters had exemplify the ways in which class indicators were communicated.

When it comes to the lack of cultural diversity that a majority of the early readers display, several of the students wrote that “we only found white Swedish children as main characters.” However, no further attempts were made to interpret this absence of culturally diverse children. The fact that the minor characters with diverse backgrounds that do appear in the texts are left in a contextual void with parents whose jobs, homes, and families are nondescript was not further discussed by the students.

Apart from the central themes that were mentioned above, the students identified norms for good behavior in the texts. One such aspect of good behavior is captured by the concept of obedience. We also found a number of other concepts that the students had found that were closely related to obedience, such as punctuality, honesty, and law obedience. The students did not identify any examples in the textbooks in which children were arguing with adults. However, quite a few examples of children helping their parents or grand-parents with baking, cooking, and looking after their younger sisters and brothers were identified. Still, the students demonstrated difficulties in linking, gender aspects to such cases of normative behavior. Inter-sectional analyses in which gender, class, and ethnicity aspects
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are jointly analysed were also absent in the student analyses.

Although the technical side of reading processes was not intended to be a focus of this research, it, rather than the conditions provided for meaning-making processes embedded in the texts, drew attention. Despite our explicit instructions that this was to be an analysis of the contents of the reading materials, no less than six pairs of students devoted a major part of their analyses to discussions of whether a synthetic or analytic approach to reading acquisition was advocated in the reader. These analyses also included the students’ thoughts about the length of sentences, how spelling was introduced, and similar comments on the technical aspects of learning to read. In our review of all the students’ analyses, we found that such aspects indeed outnumbered the discussions of how future school pupils may negotiate meanings while working with the reading materials.

Conclusions

For decades, researchers have emphasised that the creation of a learning climate which encourages negotiations of meaning is crucial for children’s literacy development and general learning (Robbins and Ehri, 1994; Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Meyer et al., 1994). As stated in the introductory part of this paper, children’s active participation in meaning-making dialogues is fundamental for the development of vocabulary, language competency, and world knowledge. In particular, these findings are important in multicultural educational settings, as the dialogue is the bridge to the language and language use in school (Cummins, 2000; Gee, 2001; Heath, 1983). The lack of dialogues before, during, and after reading aloud to the children in preschool, indicates a lack of conditions for effective learning from the start for those children (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2002; McGee and Schickedanz, 2007; Robbins and Ehri, 1994).

Furthermore, we found that, with very few exceptions, the teacher trainees who performed text analyses of the books used for literacy acquisition faced challenges when problematising the contents of the readers they analysed. The students identified the indicators of major themes of interest, but they had difficulties in drawing conclusions from these indicators, particularly when tentative conclusions would employ more than one indicator. The conclusions of these two studies indicate that there may be a risk that children are deprived of best practices, both when it comes to cracking the alphabetic code and in terms of their ability to cope with discourses on a societal level (Cummins, 2000, 2007; Gee, 2001). In both cases, children with diverse cultural and language backgrounds are the biggest losers. Two strong indicators of how crucial aspects of emergent literacy develop-
ment may be overlooked by educators were found in our data. In relation to the model for literacy described by Freebody and Luke (2003), the role of the decoder is emphasised, both in the preschools and in the students’ analyses of basals. The discussions of reading acquisition, in fact, outnumbered content analyses in some of the text analyses, despite our strict instructions to leave aspects of the technical aspects of learning to read out of the analyses. This tendency indicates that the students rather focus methodological aspects of reading acquisition, than the meaning-making aspects including discourse awareness.

The preschool informants wrote about “linguistic awareness”, but the connotation of this concept was reduced to phonological awareness. I do not argue that phonological awareness should not be a focus of early literacy education. I argue that the other aspects of literacy learning are as important. Reading the word means reading the world, thus the pragmatic and semantic aspects of linguistic awareness must be given more attention so that critical awareness can be included into pedagogical activities early on (Gee, 1996; Edwards, 2009). I also argue that learning at such an early age should be context-embedded, thus providing optimal opportunities for all children to engage in meaning-making. The literacy practices in preschools that were described showed very little of that. Instead a vast majority of reading occasions had little content focus at all. Instead the primary aim for reading aloud to children seemed to be to discipline the children and put them to rest. Our conclusion from these studies is that emphasis on meaning-making and critical awareness needs to be observed to a much greater extent by teacher educators, by primary teachers as well as by preschool teachers. The implication of this research for early literacy curriculum in teacher education is that revisions are needed so that strategies for meaning-making and fostering of critical awareness become prioritized activities in preschool and early literacy learning. The final conclusion is that equity demands transformation of the present practices.

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Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviations (within parenthesis) on Frequencies of Read-Alouds, Solitary/Thematically embedded Read-Alouds, On-going Dialogues during Reading, Follow-Up Activities and Child/Adult Initiated Follow-Up Activities during One Week, as Reported by the Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Tot. No (n=39)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Mean/Week</th>
<th>Std.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of read alouds</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic work</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary read alouds</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-going dialogue</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up: Dialogue</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up: Play</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other follow-up activity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child initiating follow-up</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult initiating follow-up</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


