

Embracing early literacy indicators: A socio-cultural story?

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Introduction

I will outline what we have come to understand as the Danish adaptation of the learning story framework. You will be taken through a narrative, beginning with our conception of the socio-cultural underpinnings of the EASE project, which have lead us to a conceive of early literacy in broad and holistic ways.

I will then disrupt the harmony by introducing early literacy indicators. I will claim that there are no pedagogic spaces outside the realm of indicators, the question is whether these indicators are open or tacit. I'll get back to that.

The story ends with considerations regarding normativity and a pragmatic yet careful approach to indicators.

Consider this presentation an invitation to discussion. Stig, Ole and I are hoping for fruitful rounds of feedback and critique once this presentation is done.

Socio-cultural underpinnings: Holistic approaches to early literacy

The socio-cultural core of the EASE project and the learning story approach (Carr, 2005) inspires a perspective sensitive to the rich and diverse forms of literate and pre-literate events that takes place every day in formal and non formal settings (Gee, 1996, 2001; Heath, 1983; Kress, 1997; Street, 1990, 1995). We aim to displace the seemingly omnipresent concept of breaking the (reading) code as the main focus for early literacy pedagogic practice (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2009). Of course we do want the children to acquire the necessary, more or less formalized skills for reading and writing, but it is important to emphasize how early literacy connects with dimensions of play, aesthetics, well being, all round personal development, critical thinking and care (Broström, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Drotner, 1991; Kendrick & McKay, 2004). There is more to early literacy than reading and writing as discrete, cognitive skills. (Westwood, 2009). As a guiding concept I suggest the concept of *literate bodies*, a phantom construct designed to inspire thinking about literacy in phenomenological and aesthetical ways:

Even the youngest of children (in Western societies, at least) are embodying early childhoods soaked in symbolic communication. Literacized bodies suggests that we emphasize the rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1998) flow of meaning and communication, and that we challenge an early literacy curriculum primarily based on individual, cognitive performance.

Following these leads, we eventually went on to question the traditional borders between spoken and written language, as we choose to understand literacies as performances of meaning (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Literacy as a means of making meaning is inclined to view speaking, reading and writing as different strategies of communication instead of sets of discrete skills. Whether this communication is drawing in the sand of the preschool sandbox, making play-money to pay the bill for sand cakes in the “restaurant” at the preschool, participating in read-aloud activities in the primary school classroom, scribbling and doodling small stories – it is calling for an early literacy curriculum fit to actually see and recognize such activities. Both as important step stones on the way to (adult) literacy, but also as meaningful social events in their own right. Emphasis is on early literacy in diverse contexts of peer-to-peer interactive learning, and on the qualities of the one-on-one teacher-to-child interactions.

Indicators: Do they enhance our vision - or are they blinders?

It is at this rather peaceful point that I want to introduce the early literacy indicators. I have briefly stated how we wanted to move early literacy teaching beyond the transmission of skills, and have invoked a range of concepts from the so called social pedagogy approach identified by the OECD (OECD, 2001, 2006). It is partly to this end - the transgression of the regime of transmission - that we introduce the indicators.

Researchers as well as teachers need to be able to spot early literacy potential in diverse events. We want to be able to talk about these literacy events without being limited to the vocabulary of f.x. phonemic awareness. The ability to spot and talk about these literacy events enables us to create and maintain literacy friendly environments, without having to buy into the traditional, school oriented ways. This way we are well on the road to eventually promote conditions for meaningful literacy events. So the indicators have the potential to enrich pedagogical practices, as they challenge us to see early literacy qualities in events that (at the moment, at least) are not typically connected to early literacy. The indicator supported deschooling of early literacy is a powerful weapon against schoolification!

But there is more to the indicators. They are tools for enhancing vision, as well as blinders: Even though we try to understand early literacy in broad and holistic ways (and are striving to make the indicators reflect this), not every event in the early childhood setting should count as an early literacy event. This is the price we pay for a sharpened focus on early literacy - to focus on something is to some extent to blur the surroundings.

And is it really a price to pay? I am skeptical about what seems to be an underlying premise for ‘pro or con indicator debates’, as I claim that it is not a question of whether we want indicators or not, as indicators are already and always installed in the normative machine we call pedagogic practice. Let me elaborate a bit: To claim a practice of indicator free early literacy teaching, is in fact to claim a practice of tacit or hidden indicators. Pedagogy is always about something, and is always inscribed in values and relations of power (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). Tacit theory (Gee, 1996) generates tacit indicators. Tacit conceptions of early literacy, and of how early literacy manifests itself as practices in early childhood settings, are in no way better than open and visible ones. To articulate a list of indicators is - at the very least - to put the

inescapable normativity out in the open, where it should be subject to contestation and constant reworking.

Hidden, narrow and/or static indicators are a problem

I think this is a good time to emphasize the provisional nature of all such lists, including the Danish list of indicators. In Denmark, the EASE project was implemented with a strong participatory dimension. The teachers participating in the project was regularly called upon to try out and reflect on various draft versions of a learning story template and the indicators. As you all know, the earliest versions of the Danish early literacy learning story template actually had an indicator tick-off list next to the actual learning story, but this design was eventually abandoned - partly with inspiration from the Thessaloniki feedback. Following Thessaloniki and the feedback from our participants we tried to downplay the indicators for a while, putting out a revised version of the early literacy template without the indicators, and with no accompanying handout. In this process of revising the template and the indicators, some of the Danish preschool- and kindergarten class teachers objected to the abandoning of the indicators, as they thought the indicators did a great job in assisting in the task of spotting diverse strands of early literacy in the children's activities. This way we came up with the current version of the learning story template you are all holding, where the indicators are on a separate handout.

To recapture the current version of the early literacy learning story template: We have tried to *hybridize* (McQuillan, 2000) the socio-cultural, holistic traditions of Carr's (2005) approach and the strengths of indicators. The result is a pretty traditional learning story template, with preset boxes for the story, photos, analysis and notes on possible follow-up activities. The indicators have migrated to a carefully designed separate hand-out to be used either as observation assistant or as a tool for the analysis of the learning stories of the day. The hand-out is the teachers companion in the midst of the action of the actual classroom setting, and can be called upon in the after hours as a tool for the analysis of the learning stories captured.

And because we have the indicators out in the open, they are open for critique and revisions, making it possible for a group of teachers to discuss what a socio cultural approach to early literacy might mean to them - at that particular setting, at that particular time, and so on...

To conclude, I would like to make clear that I think indicators are an inevitable part of pedagogic practice: If they are not visible and accessible on a list, they are still in operation - in tacit ways inside the heads of the teachers. This way the danger is not in lists of indicators, it is in the politics of early childhood education: Are indicators by policy narrow and static, being forced upon teachers and children, or are indicators broad, flexible and provisional, always able to contestation and remaking by the people involved in early childhood education on all levels? If the latter is the case, indicators can enrich the pedagogic practice in the ways I have touched upon here.

Thank you for your time. Now on to questions and debate.

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