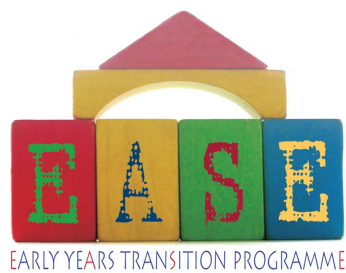




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EARLY LITERACY INDICATORS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL STORY?

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Abstract

This paper examines early literacy as a question of how to use indicators to conceptualize a connection between play-oriented activities in preschool and the formal reading and writing activities in primary school. Rooted in findings from the EASE project, this paper is drawing on Carr's (2005) Learning Story approach to documentation, continuing the movement towards a new paradigm in ECEC sketched by Broström (2006). Theoretical background of the study is a socio cultural approach to early literacy (Gee, 2008; Kress, 1997; Street, 1995). The drafting of the indicators was carried out in an action research inspired way. The teachers participating in the study was brought in to reflect on and try out various versions. The research was carried out with attention to democratic values as practitioners were involved in reflections on the research aims and methods. Voluntary informed consent was obtained from the participating practitioners and the families of the participating children. The paper argues that early literacy indicators can be problematic. Indicators can narrow down the pedagogical practices, as practitioners (and parents) might overly focus on the indicators being 'fulfilled', moving down the path of 'mechanistic pedagogy'. On the same time the practitioners expressed a need to somehow be able to identify early literacy if it was not the common sense reading and writing activities.

Early Literacy Indicators: A Socio Cultural Story?

We will continue the argument about early literacy didactics and the learning story approach, picking up where our Swedish colleagues left off. Drawing on experiences from the Danish part of the EASE-project, we will discuss the making of the learning story template and the hand-outs with early literacy indicators. The central argument is this: How to go about claiming a context sensitive, socio-cultural approach to early literacy, while at the same time employing a list of more or less universal early literacy 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. Central to the matter was – and is – a list of early literacy indicators, intended to help the teachers discover the early literacy qualities in the activities of the children. In this way the indicators has a "what to look for" function. Additionally, the indicators are thought of as tools in the interpretation and analysis of the learning stories (Jensen, Hansen, & Broström, 2010).

The ability to spot and talk about literacy events in play, drawing, and in a wide range of peer interactions etc. helps teachers and researchers to imagine 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.

On the hand-out, the indicators are grouped into three main kinds of activities which has documented relations to the development of reading and writing skills:

- Storytelling and reading (Fox, 2003; Jensen, 2010)
- Drawing, writing or scribbling (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Kress, 1997)
- Playing (Broström, 2003; Christie, 1991; Davidson, 1996; Roskos & Christie, 2007).

This is thought to provide some entrance points for observation and analysis, and should not be understood as a threefold, arbitrary logic for sorting the literacy stories into separate categories. Often, indicators from all three categories are applicable to the same early literacy story.



Context indicators are types and characters of interactions, activities and facilities that may create basis for early literacy. We are embracing an approach to assessment that emphasizes the child's benefit on the basis of the entire context. Therefore activities must challenge the children in their actual lives, and activities must relate to contextual elements that the children can combine with their social and cultural world, as they know and conceive it. As a consequence the professionals must be aware of the context elements: when they plan activities; observe activities and analyze activities. On the hand-outs the elements are: 1) type of interaction; 2) adult awareness in the interaction; 3) character of the interaction; 4) activity and 5) facilities used. These indicators are produced as a general inspiration, and must be modified to fit specific contexts in different countries and different social and cultural institutional settings.

Indicators: Playing with fire!

By employing a list of indicators, we are aware of the risk of narrowing the pedagogic practice. From a "purist" socio-cultural position, indicators are viewed as promoting an unwanted, so called tick-off approach to assessment (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), where the focus eventually will be on the child's weakness' or deficits as deducted from a standardized curriculum (indicated by the indicators). The earliest versions of the early literacy learning story template actually had an indicator tick-off list next to the actual story, but this design was eventually abandoned, as it did not connect with the socio-cultural underpinnings of the EASE approach.

Some of the preschool and kindergarten teachers participating in the project 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. It was clear that some sort of compromise was needed. The current version of the early literacy learning story template – the EASE adaptation of the learning story approach – tries to hybridize 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 teacher's companion in the midst of the action of the actual classroom setting, and can also be called upon in the after hours as a tool for the analysis of the learning stories captured.

Because the indicators no longer appear on the actual learning story template, they are not as apt to steal focus and interfere with the holistic backdrop of learning story approach.

In general indicators are to be used with extreme caution. They are tools for enhancing vision, as well as blinders: 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. But other aspects of ECEC, and not just early literacy, should of course remain in focus at other times. What we are saying is this: It is risky business to introduce a method of documentation based on a set list of early literacy indicators. We need to make sure that these indicators, however broad and holistic, does not end up living a life of their own, being lifted out of the socio-cultural theoretical framework to be misplaced and misused in a modernistic discourse of quality and control through standards (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007).

Indicators are already and always a part of pedagogic practice: To claim a practice of indicator free early literacy teaching is in fact to claim a practice of tacit or hidden indicators. Pedagogy – and early literacy in particular – is always about something, and is always inscribed in ideology, values and relations of power (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Gee, 2008; Giroux, 2001; Moss, Dahlberg, & Pence, 2000; Street, 1995). 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.

The English versions of the learning story template, early literacy indicators and context indicators are included in the back of this paper. In addition, the material translated into a number of different languages, are available for download from the Internet. Please refer to the homepage of the EASE project (<http://www.ease-eu.com>).

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