

# Literacy Education, Reading Engagement and Library Use in Multilingual Classes

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*The topic of this paper is literacy education and reading engagement in multilingual classes. The research question is: What facilitates reading engagement in the language of instruction in multilingual classes? In the paper we analyse reading engagement in the language of instruction in three multilingual classes in Norway within a literature based “book-flooding” program. The design was a research and development project in which teachers, researchers and librarians collaborated within literacy education (2007-2011). In the paper we present the pedagogical interventions within the project and analyse the subsequent reading engagement. The measuring of reading engagement is based on a survey of the participating students in 2009, two years into the project. The overwhelming majority of the students were found to be what we define as engaged readers, measured by way of the students’ amount of voluntary reading, library use and attitudes towards reading. The findings indicate that literature-based education, non-segregated educational provisions and use of library resources facilitated reading engagement in the language of instruction among both first- and second-language learners.*

Keywords: literacy education, reading engagement, library use, multilingual classes.

## Introduction

The topic of this paper is literacy education, reading engagement and library use in multilingual classes. Why study reading engagement? Within educational research, there is a major focus on the teaching and learning of literacy skills, relations between reading and writing, between reading and cognitive development and the impact of socioeconomic and sociocultural background on student reading and achievement (Kempe, Eriksson-Gustavsson, & Samuelsson, 2011; Kirmızı, 2011; Nikolajeva, 2010; Percy, 2011; Sood & Mistry, 2011) . A recurring theme is the systematic differences in reading achievements between students, depending on their socioeconomic and sociocultural background. This achievement gap is a challenge to both teachers and researchers (Hartas, 2011; Hvistendahl & Roe, 2004; Lindsay, 2010; Stanovich, 1986)

The theoretical assumption underpinning this study, is that development of reading engagement is crucial to the development of literacy. In this paper we explore the following question: What facilitates reading engagement in the language of instruction in multilingual classes? How can teachers and schools successfully contribute to reading engagement? In multilingual classes, the level of proficiency in the language of instruction varies among first-language speakers as well as between first- and second-language speakers. This variation

represents a challenge to literacy education. In this paper, we analyse a literature-based literacy programme in the language of instruction and results in terms of reading engagement in three classes where the vast majority were multilingual students.

In the late PISA study, reading engagement is defined in terms of the students' voluntary reading and their attitudes towards reading (Roe, 2008). In our study, we operationalize reading engagement in terms of the frequency and quantity of the students' voluntary reading, their use of the public library for literacy purposes, and their attitudes towards reading.

The multilingual school in this study is situated in a mid-size Norwegian city. The socio-economic status of the families in the area is the lowest in the city in terms of unemployment, the number of welfare recipients and level of education. About 75% of the students at the school were multilingual. Of the multilingual children, some were born in Norway while others had immigrated at elementary school age. The children under study were in fourth grade in the school year 2008/2009, the main year under discussion in this paper and the year for the student survey on reading engagement.

## Theoretical framework

The PISA reports document achievement gaps between individual students that are related to gender and socio-economic and ethnic background (Hvistendahl & Roe, 2004; Kjærnsli, Lie, Olsen, Roe, & Turmo, 2004; Kjærnsli & Roe, 2010). A recent study by Bakken and Danielsen (2011) confirms the existence of such gaps in Norway. There is a significant effect of the number of books in the students' homes on their academic performance. Bakken (2004) states:

Students with relatively few books at home have, in the ten-year period [1992–2002], shown a weakened level of school achievement, while those students who grew up with many books at home performed even better than that category of students did ten years ago. In 1992, the difference was 27 percentage points with regard to educational achievements, between those who had fewer than 20 books at home and those who had more than 500. In 2002, the difference was 35 percentage points (Bakken, 2004, pp. 84–85, our translation).

For children who have few books at home, it is especially important that schools provide rich access to books. In general, there is a positive correlation between students' socio-economic status and their attitudes to reading and reading engagement (Roe, 2008). However, there is one promising exception. Students from homes with low socio-economic status who are engaged and voluntary readers in their spare time perform better than students with higher socio-economic status but less reading engagement in their spare time:

The most interesting finding is perhaps that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, but with high levels of reading engagement, on average, score better than students from medium or high socio-economic backgrounds that are less reading engagement. This calls for cautious optimism, because it is, in fact, possible for the school to affect the students' attitudes towards reading, whereas schools cannot affect the students' socio-economic background (Roe, 2008, p. 43, our translation).

Although schools cannot affect a student's socio-economic background, they can provide access to literature and opportunity for voluntary reading. The PISA study indicates that this can be particularly beneficial for students with few books at home. A literature-based literacy education programme is a case in point.

A single textbook on any specific school subject is rarely suited to the multiple interests, levels of proficiency in the language of instruction and diverse needs of children in socially and culturally complex classrooms. Literature-based programmes in literacy education provide students with great access to fiction and multiple literary genres at different levels of complexity. The students are allowed time in class for voluntary reading. The pedagogical work is organized in relation to the students' reading. The students visit the public library to access literature. The students dramatize what they read and they may also visit the theatre or watch movies related to their reading. They talk and write about what they are reading and share this with each other; they paint, draw and listen to literature read by teachers and librarians. They get the opportunity to meet authors through writers' visits (Alleklef & Lindvall, 2003).

An important pedagogical principle in literature-based literacy education is that all the participating students are given equal access to reading materials that they find interesting. Equally important is that they share literary experiences with each other (Gambrell, 1996). The development of literacy is a form of social practice (Barton, 2007; Street, 1997, 2003). In New Literacy Studies (Barton, 2007; Street, 1997, 2003) it is emphasized that literacy activities are embedded. The activities are entrenched in particular social interactions, they are shared experiences and, furthermore, they are fixed to, or take part in forming, the agents' identity:

... literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that is, it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. It is also embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context ... (Street, 2003, pp. 77–78).

People develop a passion for reading in contexts where reading is social, enjoyable and meaningful to the reader (Barton, 2007; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000). Literature-based programmes in literacy education provide students with reading material of various genres and complexity. This, in combination with individual choice of books and book-sharing pedagogical activities, facilitates student reading. In this context, the access to library resources can make a difference.

Reading engagement is analysed from various angles in research on literacy education. The common theoretical assumption is that children's exposure to books they find interesting, and reading books of their own choice, facilitates and enhances reading engagement (Alleklef, 2003; Axelsson, 2000; Elley, 1991; Gambrell, 1996; Morrow, 1997; Dressman, 1997; Roe, 2011; Certo 2010; Pihl, 2012). Studies indicate that increasing the amount and breadth of children's reading contributes to an intrinsic desire to read. Specifically, creating classroom cultures that foster reading and the sharing of books enhances reading engagement (Gambrell, 1996, Roe, 2008). According to Gambrell (1996), the motivation to read is, in turn, connected to six research-based factors. These factors involve access to books and a variety of literacy practices: the teacher is an explicit reading model; the classroom is a book-rich environment; there are good opportunities for choosing literature; there are opportunities to interact socially with each other; there are opportunities to become familiar with a wide range of books; and there are appropriate reading-related incentives (Gambrell, 1996).

Empirical studies of literature-based literacy programmes (also called 'book flooding programmes') indicate that students' reading of fiction in the language of instruction, the reading of books to students and the pedagogical integration of reading, writing and book-

sharing activities contribute towards increased motivation for reading and the incidental learning of language and content. Research presented by Elley (1991), Morrow et al. (1997), Axelsson (2000) and Alleklev and Lindvall (2003), for instance, has shown a positive correlation between the reading of fiction in school subjects, students' literacy performance and content learning. These studies from different parts of the world show that the mentioned reading activities enhance literacy development and reading engagement. This also pertains to students from linguistic minority backgrounds who read fiction and other books that interest them in the language of instruction (Alleklev & Lindvall, 2003; Axelsson, 2000; Elley, 1991, 1992; Morrow et al., 1997).

The approach in the literature-based literacy project presented here addresses several of the factors that are held in the research literature to facilitate reading engagement. We examine and discuss the relationship between reading engagement and the development of a book-rich environment at school with a literature-based literacy programme including the use of the public library in literacy education.

## Material and method

The research and development project involved a team of educational researchers, a teacher team at a multilingual school and public librarians who collaborated within literacy education for four years (Pihl, 2011). The multilingual school in the study is situated in a mid-size Norwegian city. A branch of the public library is located in the vicinity of the school, and the main public library is situated in the city centre. The socio-economic status of the families in the area is, on average, low in terms of unemployment, numbers of welfare recipients and level of education. At the start of the project, the school had approximately 600 children and almost 80 staff members (Espevoll, 2009). About 75% of the students at the school were multilingual. Of the multilingual children, some were born in Norway while others had immigrated at elementary school age. Eighty-four children from three classes were followed from grade three through to grade six. The school principal, six teachers, one assistant, two bilingual teaching assistants, one school librarian and one public librarian participated in the project. The children were in fourth grade in the school year 2008/2009, the main year under discussion in this paper. Teachers and librarians collaborated to provide the classes with fiction and prose related to thematic topics in Norwegian, social science and visual arts. Teachers and librarians worked with the fiction in multiple pedagogical ways in which the sharing of literary experiences was central (Axelsson, 2000; Barton, 2007). The librarian from the public library introduced new literature to the children and teachers.

A literature-based literacy programme in the language of instruction was initiated by educational researchers in a research and development project (2007–2011) (Pihl, 2009, 2011; van der Kooij & Pihl, 2009). The aim was to provide literacy education based on student reading of fiction in school subjects. This was implemented in terms of non-segregated educational provisions. All pupils were included in the literature based literacy program regardless of individual proficiency in the language of instruction, special educational needs or linguistic minority background. The pedagogical interventions stimulated the students' voluntary reading at school, at home and at the public library. Extensive use of the public library within literacy education was an important pedagogical intervention within the project. Students' individual choice of books was central.

The researchers proposed interprofessional collaboration between teachers and librarians and use of library resources in order to realize the aims (Bueie & Pihl, 2009; Pihl, 2009; van der Kooij & Pihl, 2009). Interprofessional collaboration was developed in network meetings and steering group meetings, which worked as ‘change laboratories’, based on the principles outlined by Engeström in his theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987; Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Pihl, 2011) Researchers conducted participant observations, interviewed teachers and librarians within the project, monitored student reading and conducted an electronic survey in June of 2009.

The effect of collaboration between researchers, teachers and librarians was that the teachers incorporated reading and work with fiction into the school subjects, and, together with the librarians, they selected books suitable for the specific classes and integrated the use of the public library and library resources into their pedagogical work. Literature-based literacy education was organized into four multidisciplinary topics during 2008 and 2009. Within these topics, the children were provided with books in the classrooms, with a total of 227 books rotating between the three classes. The teachers in two of the classes took the children to the public library seven times during the spring semester in 2009, whereas the third class visited the public library once on an organized trip. As part of the library visits, the librarian read and presented new, high-quality books to the visiting student groups.

The quantitative analysis is based on observations and documentation of the students’ reading and on a survey to the students in June 2009, after two years of pedagogical work with reading within the book-flooding program. Here, we present findings from the reading documentation and from the electronic survey on the children’s reading habits and use of the public library. Altogether, 66 of the 84 fourth graders in the project school completed the survey, representing a 79% response rate. Reading engagement was analysed in terms of frequency and correlation analysis of reading enjoyment, voluntary reading and use of the public library for literacy purposes. Based on ethical considerations, we did not conduct a pre-test of reading engagement among the students in the three classes. The reason was that we knew that the students had not had the chance to engage in extensive voluntary reading and library use. We thus considered it unethical to ask the students to answer a survey in which all questions concern student reading and library use.

## Research interventions and non-segregated literacy education

Van der Kooij and Pihl (2009) identified two discourses that coexisted in the school in the initial phase of the research project: a ‘resource discourse’ and a ‘deficiency discourse’. With the former, the staff regarded multilingualism as a resource for the student, the school and society, and had high goals of integration, equality and democratic participation for all the children. The deficiency discourse, however, involved a focus on what the minority children ‘lacked’ when they came to school. The staff looked for new ways to compensate for what they characterized as ‘holes’ in the everyday knowledge, conceptual understanding and vocabulary that the minority children brought to school.

In the initial phase, the presence of the deficiency discourse was a challenge to the implementation of educational provisions requiring the inclusion of all students. The aim of the project was that literature-based education, and, in particular, extensive use of library resources, should involve all students, regardless of their proficiency in the language of instruction. Extending both the quality and the quantity of the use of the local branch of the public library, with its free access to qualified librarians and a wide selection of books, was a

key method in the project for including all students in literacy education.

Several studies show that segregated teaching of minority children seldom has positive educational or social effects (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Bakken & Danielsen, 2011; Nordahl, Kostøl, & Mausethagen, 2009). Segregated teaching is also counter-productive to reaching the school's goals of social equality and inclusion. In line with the deficiency discourse, however, the teachers first decided that only 'low achievers' should visit the public library on a regular basis during school hours. Use of library resources was regarded as a compensatory measure, which should only be provided to the 'needy'. At the time, the teachers were not convinced by the research findings presented in favour of non-segregated educational measures. Thus, at the start of school in August 2008, the teachers organized library visits only for a small, selected group of pupils from minority backgrounds—the second-language learners with literacy performance in the language of instruction at a critically low level. This amounted to segregated education.

After some weeks, however, the teachers stopped segregating the children into high- and low-achiever groups when visiting the library. Several factors contributed to the changes in teacher practice. The teachers seemed to be influenced by the dissemination of research that substantiated the impact of non-segregated teaching on student learning and motivation. Furthermore, research presented about the positive outcomes of voluntary reading, along with the children's eagerness to read within the actual literature-based literacy programme, contributed to changes in the teachers' practices (Pihl, 2011).

## Literature based literacy education, library use and reading engagement

The researchers monitored the reading of all 84 students in fourth grade. The students', teachers' and researchers' careful documentation of the students' reading throughout the school year showed that the students read a total of 123,000 pages during this year, yielding an average of 1464 pages per student. This means that, on average, each of these 84 students, most of whom were second-language learners from low socio-economic backgrounds, had read the equivalent of 15 books of almost 100 pages each in the language of instruction during one school year.

Bakken (2004) showed that the number of books in a student's home significantly affects his or her academic performance. In our electronic survey, students answered the question 'How many books do you own?' The median value of the responses was 18. Although the question only pertained to the books owned by the students themselves, it is fair to assume that the number gives an indication of the number of books in the family. For a comparison, in we also administered the survey in a different school in a different area of the same city, in a middle class area with only 11% minority students. The median value of number of student owned books, as reported by the students in this school (N= 50), was 40 books. A typical student in the comparison school hence reports to own more than twice as many books as the typical student of the school under study. The students under study here are likely to belong to the groups of students who have few books at home, in turn correlated with low school achievements as measured by achieved grades in school (Bakken, 2004).

What made the average student who owned only 18 books read 15 books with almost 100 pages each during one school year? The survey results and reading accounting observations

indicate that the literature-based literacy programme, which gave students access to books they found interesting and encouraged voluntary reading in school, facilitated reading engagement.

The survey shows that the overwhelming majority like to read, and that they read often in their free time: Altogether, 97% (64 out of 66) of the students reported that they enjoyed reading. When asked how often they read for pleasure, 88% reported that they read every day or several times a week because they wanted to. Only one student reported never reading for pleasure. Three quarters of the students liked to read for half an hour or more when they read for pleasure. These results show that, two years into the project, the overwhelming majority of students in the project had a positive attitude towards reading. They engaged in voluntary reading in their spare time because they enjoyed it.

The survey also documented the students' use of the public library in their spare time. The students reported their use of the local branch of the public library, as well as their use of the main public library in the city centre. In the survey, almost 90% of the students reported visiting the local public library branch at least once a week, and 68% of the students reported using this library several times a week or even daily. As noted earlier, there were seven visits to the local public library organized by the teachers and the librarian during this school year for each student in two of the classes, and one visit for each student in the third class. The remaining library visits reported by the students were visits they had made on their own.

These students also used the main public library in the centre of the city. Our survey shows that 60% of the students visited the main public library at least once a month. There was a small but statistically significant correlation between visiting the local branch and visiting the main public library: a student who visited the local branch often was also likely to have visited the main public library often (Pearson's  $r = 0.362$ , correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed))

The students' main activities at the public library were borrowing and reading books. Altogether, 95% of the students borrowed books, and 64% read books at the public library. It is interesting that 50% of the students reported that they were with friends at the library. This indicates that the literacy practices the children engaged in at the library were social activities, which they shared with friends to a considerable extent.

From this we conclude that the students hold a high degree of reading engagement, as analysed in terms of reading enjoyment, voluntary reading and use of the public library for literacy purposes. The overall high frequency of voluntary public library visits may well compensate for the relatively low numbers of books these students owned and the likely correspondingly low total number of books at home. The public library differs from the classroom in interesting ways. The library is a social place where people interact with each other and with the library resources available, which works within New Literacy Studies emphasize as important for literacy activities such as reading. The public library is characterized as a 'liminal space' by Dressman (1997) a 'low-intensive' learning arena by Audunson (2005) and 'back-stage' by Rafste (2005), in contrast to the school, which is characterized as a 'high-intensive arena' (Audunson, 2005) and 'front-stage' (Rafste, 2005). The complementary qualities and resources of the public library may provide possibilities for a student to develop reading engagement according to his or her level of linguistic proficiency, interests and pace, when the student uses the public library for his or her own needs.

The teachers and librarians play important roles as facilitators in a literature-based literacy education programme. If the school and teachers acknowledge the potential contributions of librarians and the public library within literacy education, this may pave the way for interprofessional collaboration within literacy education. Pihl (2011) holds that in the present situation, in which discourses of accountability dominate the education sector, the mandate of the teaching profession is acutely ambivalent. Teaching is supposed to contribute to qualifications and democratic inclusion, but research indicates that education contributes towards the reproduction of social inequality. The reproduction of social inequality is mediated by high-stakes testing (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Pihl, 2009; Wiley & Wright, 2004). Against this background and the present state of multiplicity, the question of how teaching can qualify all pupils in the language of instruction and contribute to literacy, inclusion and democratic citizenship is a pressing issue

The changes in literacy teaching practices at the school, which involved the literature-based programme and collaboration between the school and library within literacy education, provided the students with access to literature and reading in a new and stimulating milieu. The sharing of literary experiences was central to the project. Teachers dealt with literacy education as a social phenomenon. Without this, those children in the multicultural school who had few books at home would have had limited opportunities to choose reading material that interested them. In the project, they had the opportunity to engage in voluntary reading at school and at home, in a non-segregated literacy education. They read fiction as well as facts within certain subjects in the school curriculum. The library provided the school classes with relevant books in their classrooms, and minimized the use of a 'one fits all' textbook for the whole class. The organized trips to the local branch of the public library assisted the children in using the public library for their own reading purposes, giving them access to literature and, we suggest, extensive opportunity to express and develop their reading engagement. The results indicate that this, in combination with individual choice of books and sharing of literary events in an inclusive pedagogical environment, is important for the development of minority and majority student literacy and reading engagement.

The results indicate that the school has the potential to promote reading engagement, even among students with low socio-economic status and among second-language learners. Literature-based literacy education based on collaboration between teachers and librarians has a positive effect on the development of reading engagement in terms of attitudes to reading, and the frequency and amount of voluntary reading and reading-related activities, such as library use. The results give rise to cautious optimism that literature-based literacy education has the potential to reduce possible negative effects of low socio-economic status and minority background on reading engagement in the language of instruction.

Recent studies show that reading engagement has in turn positive impact on reading achievement. This is recently confirmed by Krashen et al (Krashen, Lee, & Mcquillan, 2012), based on the data from PIRLS; conducted in 40 countries in 2007. Based on multivariate analysis at national and international level, Krashen et al conclude that the access to books had a larger impact on reading achievement than poverty. These are important arguments in favour of literacy education giving priority to development of reading engagement. And the access to libraries proved to be a decisive factor in providing children and young people access to books and reading (Krashen et al., 2012), The potential for use of library resources in teaching and learning is, however, far greater than the actual use of library resources in literacy education (Pihl, 2012).



## Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the relationship between a literature-based literacy programme in the language of instruction and reading engagement in multilingual classes. We have presented results from a literacy project in Norway (2007–2011), which show promise in terms of reading engagement in the language of instruction among both first- and second-language learners. As the teachers did not practise literature-based literacy education or use the public library regularly before the research and development project started in 2007, we argue that the literature-based programme facilitated the reading engagement documented among the children during the 2008/2009 school year. We suggest that non-segregated, literature-based literacy education and use of library resources in literacy education contributed to the positive results in terms of reading engagement. Collaboration between teachers and librarians within literacy education may contribute to realization of the mandate of the teaching profession in a multilingual school. This collaboration has yielded promising results with regard to reading engagement among all students. In conclusion, research documents a positive interrelationship between literature based literacy education, students' access to books in classrooms and libraries, voluntary reading and reading engagement in the language of instruction among first and second language learners. And this does in turn have positive impact on reading achievement. At a time when teachers increasingly are under pressure to “teaching to the test”, these research findings provide important arguments in favour of literacy education providing time and space for voluntary reading and library use in school.

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