Multilingual school starters: social semiotics perspectives on second language and literacy learning in education

Helle Pia Laursen

Aarhus University, Department of Education, Denmark

The starting point for this paper is the still increasing role of literacy in educational settings. Often primary education is seen as almost being synonymous with learning to read and write and activities that include literacy play a pivotal role. At the same time, in the Nordic countries, there seems to be a growing tendency to use literacy skills to regulate education through outcome metrics and international comparisons of test scores. This implies a conceptualization of literacy as a set of measurable skills, which can be measured in a specific language. Thus, literacy is perceived as a more or less universal, mental and language-neutral phenomenon; however it is implicitly linked to a given language that in turn is treated as an inherently natural phenomenon. Thus literacy acquisition is reduced to a question of adding signs to a language the student is expected to know, thereby neglecting the fact that this is not the case for all children. Or this is seen as a deviation from the norm rather than a common condition for many children in this age of globalisation. Furthermore, this perception of literacy entails that the student's possible insights into other ways of adding signs to language than those we know from a specific version of the Latin alphabet, fall outside the interests of research and teaching. From this perspective and with a social semiotic view on language and literacy acquisition in multilingual settings, I will argue that a deconstruction of such ideological conceptualizations of language and literacy requires a separation of language and literacy in order to reconstruct the relationship in ways that reflect the complexity of the children's communicative repertoires and their engagement in language and literacy as meaning making.

Keywords: Literacy, language, multilingualism, learning, social semiotics.