Constructing literacy identity through social interaction

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In a discussion of policy claims about "what literacy is" and "what literacy does", Bartlett (2008) notes that "we should not consider literacy as an actor with some "impact"; instead, we should examine how people use literacy in ways that are conditioned by social and cultural forces" (Bartlett 2008, p. 737). Hereby she emphasizes that literacy has no automatic, universal, and predictable effect, but that "the outcomes" of literacy depend on complex social interactions, and by the way different individuals assign meaning to literacy in diverse sociolinguistic settings.

Drawing on theories on investment in language learning (e.g. Peirce Norton, 1995; Norton & Toohey 2011) and recent studies focusing on how the educational trajectory of a student is shaped by the language and literacy practices at his or her school, and by the social relationships and identities that are made possible here (e.g. Bartlett, 2007), in this paper, I explore how children, at an early stage in their schooling, invest in literacy, and how in their investments they draw on different figured worlds as interactional resources when constructing their identity and generating meaning in their social worlds.

The empirical basis for this paper consists of interviews with three children in year 1 a few months after school start focusing on the children’s perceptions of reading and writing processes and on the social practices in which reading and writing are integrated. The analysis demonstrates that their investments involve rather complex processes which keep changing perspective and which are based on ‘as-if realms’ that add meaning to the various literacy practices. The processes are also shaped and undergo change through interactional negotiation, through which different possible social identity positions are tested.

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