This paper examines the pedagogical beliefs and practices of eleven teachers who work with Somali and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian mother-tongue education in Sweden. We focus in particular on their views of early literacy instruction, and their perception of the relative impact that their instruction may have on the children’s early literacy development in the mother tongue. The study can be situated within the field of teacher cognition (see e.g. Borg, 1998, 2003, 2006).

In Sweden, there has been legal support since the 1970s for the right of children with mother tongues other than Swedish to receive mother-tongue instruction. However, the legitimacy and practice of mother-tongue education has often been contested in public and political debates. The considerable problems surrounding the implementation of the mother-tongue education policy in Sweden have been dealt with in earlier research (e.g. Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012), but less attention has been paid to the content of the instruction offered to pupils in mother-tongue education, and/or to the views and perceptions of the teachers in charge of this education. In this paper, we draw on data from in-depth teacher interviews and field notes of classroom activities. We discuss the mother-tongue teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and practices in the light of current institutional and language-political debates in Sweden. One recurring theme in the interviews, which will be addressed in the paper, is the teachers’ experiences of struggling for legitimacy and credibility as professionals.

Keywords: literacy practices, mother-tongue education, teacher beliefs.