

Migrants and Literacy Crises

Lars Holm, Aarhus University, Department of Education (DPU) &
Helle Pia Laursen, Aarhus University, Department of Education (DPU)

International comparisons of levels of literacy have in some countries been interpreted as an indication of a prevailing literacy crisis that demands political actions to avoid negative impact on national competitiveness, democracy, and coherence. Special attention is focused in the Danish crisis discourse on literacy as a reading competence and on migrants who, in particular, have become symbols of the crisis. In this article, the values and beliefs embedded in the political actions taken in the wake of the literacy crisis are analysed and the implications of the functionally based discursive construction of the literacy crisis for migrants are discussed. Based on an understanding of literacies as historically situated practices and value systems it is argued that the construction of the Danish literacy crisis can be seen as an ideological phenomenon aimed at changing pedagogical and educational values and practices. In addition, the specific construction of the literacy crisis leads to an increased pressure on migrants to adjust and adapt to a monolingual standard of literacy, and to certain valued literacy practices.

Keywords: literacy, literacy crisis, functional literacy, migrants

Introduction

In most Western European countries, literacy has become a central issue in the educational discourse, closely related to an assumed increase in the literacy requirements of a modern knowledge society (Street 2004; Gebhard 2004). In Denmark, literacy came to the attention of the general public particularly in 2005 when, following the PISA measurements conducted in Denmark in 2000 and 2003, and in Copenhagen in 2005, a prevailing and comprehensive literacy crisis was announced by the government. Levels of literacy were claimed to be too low, with an alarming impact on national competitiveness, democracy and coherence.

It is not the first time in history that a literacy crisis has been proclaimed. Seen in an international perspective, constructions of literacy crises are a well-known phenomenon and have often been used as a reason for political initiatives within education (Graff 1994; Welch & Freebody 1993). The specific discursive construction of the crisis is interesting because the way in which the

Corresponding authors' email: larsh@dpu.dk, heen@dpu.dk

ISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä

© 2011: The authors

<http://apples.jyu.fi>

crisis is conceptualised and theorised also indicates and legitimates the actions to be taken to overcome it. In this article the construction of the Danish literacy crisis will be analysed with special attention to its implications for migrants.

On conceptualizations of literacy

As a contested and complex concept, literacy has been theorised and investigated from different perspectives. Broadly speaking three different theoretical approaches to literacy can be identified (Holm 2006).

One approach is the cognitive approach, which focuses on mental processes and sees literacy as a tool of the intellect. Within this approach, literacy is basically seen as an unambiguous and unchanging phenomenon with universal intellectual and social implications. This understanding implies a sharp distinction between orality and literacy, between literate and illiterate individuals and between oral and literate cultures (Goody 1987, 1999). The research interest is directed towards psychological processes and the cognitive effects of literacy. The pedagogical focus is on learning the alphabetical principles and on stimulating the intellect through reading and writing.

Another approach is the functional approach, which focuses on societal demands and sees literacy as specific and measurable skills. Literacy is understood as a changeable phenomenon with a utility value for society (Verhoeven 1994). It is assumed that literacy makes a direct contribution to productivity and promotes political participation and cultural integration of disadvantaged and marginal groups (Levine 1994). The research interest is oriented towards identifying and levelling literacy sub skills in order to develop literacy taxonomies. The pedagogical focus is on enabling the students to reach the predefined literacy levels in these taxonomies.

The third approach is the social approach, which focuses on complexity and diversity in societies and sees literacy as multiple – as literacies – and as ideological constructions always historically situated and related to values and power relations. The research interest is directed towards analysing literacy practices in different settings and the relationships between local literacy practices and broader social power relations (Barton 1994). The pedagogical focus is on developing literacy teaching in a context characterised by increasing local diversity and global connectedness (Cope & Kalantzis 2000: 5).

Both the cognitive and the functional approaches to literacy are grounded in a so-called autonomous conception of literacy. This conception refers to the idea that literacy is a neutral skill that can be described separate from the local context. The social approach to literacy disregards the autonomous conception and sees literacy as a product of social and political processes always embedded in value systems and relations of power (Street 1984), and therefore literacy always involves “contests over meanings, definitions and boundaries and struggles for control of the literacy agenda” (Street 1997: 48).

Based on Shore and Wright (1997), the term literacy can be characterized as a mobilizing metaphor. As a mobilizing metaphor literacy becomes the centre of a cluster of keywords which “... connect with, and appropriate, the positive meanings and legitimacy derived from other key symbols of government ...” (Shore & Wright 1997: 20). By associating literacy with concepts such as ‘social

integration` and `national competitiveness`, literacy is given a powerful surplus value making investment in literacy a necessary condition for preserving `the welfare state`.

An exploration of the literacy discourse as text and an identification of the configuration of meanings and values associated with literacy can show "... how taken-for-granted assumptions channel policy debates in certain directions, inform the dominant ways policy problems are identified, enable particular classifications of target groups, and legitimize certain policy solutions while marginalizing others" (Wedel et al. 2005: 34). By defining literacy in certain ways and constructing distinctions and classifications of people, new categories of individuals are created. This process can for instance be seen in the appearance of the category `functional illiterates` in the Danish discourse and the earmarking of migrants as a special risk group.

In this article, we examine the Danish policy discourse about literacy during the period from 2003-2007 through public and official documents on literacy with special focus on migrants in education. In line with Shore and Wright (1997), we define discourses as "configurations of ideas which provide the threads from which ideologies are woven" (Shore & Wright 1997: 18). By tracking literacy as the central keyword and paying attention to its accompanying terms we explore how certain understandings of literacy are given institutional authority and how social categories are constructed and circulated through discourse. The central objects of analysis are the Danish National Competence Accounts (Undervisningsministeriet / Ministry of Education 2005a) and Danish newspaper articles presenting and interpreting the PISA results in the period 2003-2007. The Danish National Competence Accounts are documents based on politics emerging from the Organizations for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which extensively frames discussions on Danish Educational policy. From 1998 to 2003 OECD conducted the project Definition and Selection of Competences (DeSeCo) with the aim of "providing a sound conceptual framework to inform the identification of key competencies and strengthen international surveys measuring the competence level of young people and adults" (OECD 2005). The DeSeCo project is linked to PISA by setting the conceptual context for international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) (OECD 2003). As in many other countries, PISA has gained wide publicity in the Danish media and has been a point of reference when educational reforms are announced.

The analysis of the political discourse on literacy crisis is part of our ongoing ethnographic research on the construction and enactment of literacy as social practice in different educational contexts. A discursive outline helps seeing literacy not as a neutral and unproblematic given that is implemented top-down, but as something that needs to be questioned and analyzed as a contested concept that is re-contextualized, negotiated and brought into being through the practices of actors in different arenas (Laursen 2008, 2009, 2010; Holm 2004, 2009c).

The construction of a crisis

Reactions to the results of the national placement in the PISA surveys clearly vary from country to country. According to Kress (2002), in England they shrugged their shoulders at quite moderate PISA results and found no reason to establish comprehensive educational initiatives. In Germany poor PISA results created shockwaves that resulted in the largest investment in education in the history of the German state (Kress 2002). In Denmark the political reaction to poor PISA results was neither a shrug of shoulders nor a massive reform movement and an investment in education in general. Instead, a number of political interventions related to literacy in the early years were launched through the announcement and construction of a prevailing literacy crisis.

Within Danish rhetoric, the literacy crisis is said to affect both the basic literacy skills as well as the general conditions of national competitiveness, democracy, and coherence.

The concern regarding basic literacy skills is associated with the concept of functional literacy and with a fear of the educational system producing a large number of so-called 'functional illiterates'.

It is a characteristic feature of the Danish educational discourse that literacy is understood within a functional literacy paradigm. The term functional generally represents what is supposed to be the minimal level of reading and writing skills required for an individual to function in work and as a citizen and is usually used to characterise a relationship between an individual and the requirements of an educational institution or a work place.

The PISA results from 2003 were interpreted by Henrik Bach Mortensen, Director in the Confederation of Danish Employers (DA) as indicating that "17 % of students are leaving school with such a low level of competence that they cannot go on to further education." (Jyllandsposten 06.12.04 - our translation). And, according to the former Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, it is "especially alarming, that almost 17 % of students are leaving state schools without being able to read properly. They are what in the jargon is termed 'functional illiterates'" (Kristeligt Dagblad 08.12.04 - our translation). In an article in Berlingske Tidende 13.01.05 - also addressing the literacy crisis - functional illiteracy is illustrated in the following way in a so-called fact box:

"A functional illiterate might have difficulties in reading and understanding the content of course materials, in following written instructions, and in writing meeting agendas and other professional informative texts." (Berlingske Tidende 13.01.05 - our translation).

As regards conditions of national competitiveness and democracy, many politicians focus especially on the national placement in international rankings, which indicates a relationship between the national literacy level and the economic wealth of a country. Thus the former minister of education, Ulla Tørnæs, states that the crisis is a serious threat to the knowledge society (Jyllandsposten 06.12.04). In line with this concern, the former Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen fears that the literacy crisis might "break up society into a well educated elite and a residual group with high unemployment and low income" (Kristeligt Dagblad 08.12.04).

Special attention is focused in the Danish crisis discourse on migrants who, in particular, have become symbols of the crisis. It is often emphasised that migrants and their literacy levels are a central part of the problem (Egelund & Rangvid 2005).

A so-called ethnic PISA survey, conducted in 2007 in 112 schools with a high percentage of bilingual children, is said to show "... that 47% of all bilingual children have not learnt enough in school to enable them to read at the level necessary to function in a modern society. It looks even worse if you focus on children from a non-Western background: in this case 53% of all children, and 64 % of Arabic children, leave school without 'a functional reading competency' as it is called professionally" (Jyllandsposten 09.05.07 - our translation).

Another PISA survey carried out in Copenhagen in 2005 is said to show that "... 52 % of all second generation immigrants in ninth grade in Copenhagen do not reach the minimal level of reading necessary for completing their education" (Jyllandsposten 12.01.05 - our translation).

A number of social expectations can be identified embedded in the proclaimed literacy crisis and, as migrants are assumed to be the weakest link, they are therefore expected to respond to these social expectations particularly strongly. From the societal perspective, the relationship between migrants and literacy becomes a matter of providing migrants with the literacy competencies that are socially valued.

This raises questions about how migrants are to be provided with the socially valued literacy competences and what kind of literacy is on offer. In the following, we will analyse the predominant construction of literacy in policy documents and the implications for migrants within this construction.

The official conception of literacy

The ministerial conceptualization of literacy is part of the development of the Danish National Competence Accounts. The National Competence Accounts are a result of the work of an interdepartmental committee and are characterised as a new way to analyse human resources. The Accounts map out ten key competences, the first of which is literacy. In the Accounts the concept of literacy is firmly grounded in a functional approach, according to which literacy is seen as human capital and as a nation's investment in its population in order to make them more productive. Thus, literacy education becomes a means of adding value to the labour force.

The following quotation is from 2002 and it is part of the preparation of the Danish National Competence Accounts.

**'Key competences- research contribution to the National Competence Accounts'
Torben Pilegaard Jensen, Director of Research, AKF- Danish Institute of
Governmental Research**

"The interest in literacy takes, as mentioned, its point of departure from the fact that we have left the industrial society and are standing in the midst of the knowledge and information society. The number of manual jobs is few. On the contrary, many jobs require sorting and extracting usable knowledge from written material. Internationally, much attention is focused on the population's ability in this area (OECD 1996, 1997,

1999, 2001). This is due to the fact that poor skills lead to poor chances of completing an education and having a permanent affiliation to the labour market, which is crucial for social integration into society.”(Jensen 2002 - our translation).

In this research contribution to the Accounts, Director of Research Torben Pilegaard Jensen thus builds on the assumption that there is a straightforward relationship between literacy standards and economic growth, and that literacy education in itself is a means to increase the value of the labour force. The logic in his argument can be illustrated in this way:

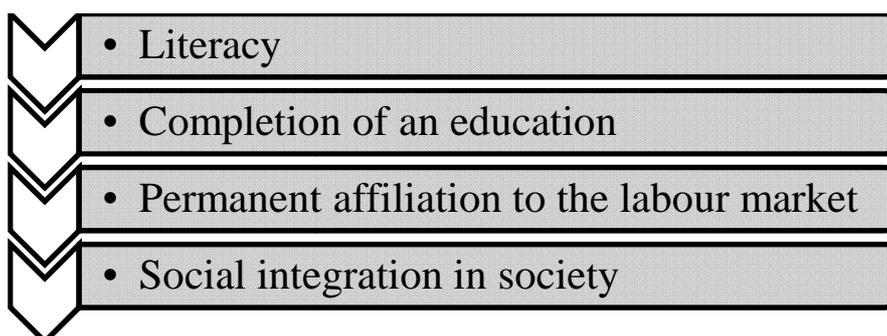


Figure 1. The construction of an argument

Literacy understood as sorting and extracting information from written materials leads to educational success, which itself leads to occupational success, which results in social integration. A number of underlying and unquestioned assumptions are striking in this chain of argument. Nevertheless, a powerful mobilising metaphor and reasoning practice is established in that literacy has been linked to the positive meaning and legitimacy associated with social integration in society.

A closer look at the Danish National Competence Accounts reveals that literacy competence is associated with the use of written information and is mainly – if not entirely – understood as a reception skill. It is – in our translation – described like this:

5.1.2 What is literacy competence?

The ability to extract usable information from written material is essential to self-realisation in the modern information and knowledge society. Literacy is defined more broadly than formerly when the focus was on skills in a narrow sense, often called functional skills e.g. reading and writing skills.

In the broader definition of literacy competence, the ability to understand and interpret written information or an assignment in its context is emphasised, and thereby the ability to use what is read as part of a greater whole. Thus, in the NCA, literacy competence is understood as the ability to understand and use written information in everyday life in the home, at work, and in society”. (Undervisningsministeriet / Ministry of Education 2005a - our translation).

Even though the definition of literacy used in the document is characterised as broad, it has clearly become a reception skill as it is defined as “the ability to extract usable information from written materials” and, later, as “the ability to

understand and use written information in everyday life in the home, at work and in society" (Undervisningsministeriet / Ministry of Education 2005a - our translation). In other words, within this definition of literacy competence, you are not supposed to produce usable information or to express your own opinions. What is valued exclusively is your use of the information others find relevant to you.

Thus, the contemporary official conception of literacy is indeed based on a functionality that relates to certain logic. This logic establishes a specific causal connection between the acquisition of literacy on the one hand, and social integration and economic growth on the other hand. At the same time, this logic links the functionality of literacy to one specifically valued competence - the extraction of information from written materials.

It is a characteristic feature of this discourse that the notion of literacy is used in varied and often slippery ways. Etymologically the word literacy is related to the word letter and is traditionally understood as reading and writing. In the above quotation, literacy is defined as "sorting and extracting information from written materials". However, in the same document we also find another definition of literacy: "Literacy is broadly defined as the knowledge, understanding, and skills necessary to function effectively in everyday life" (Jensen 2002). It is this ambivalent use of the concept that makes it possible to apply the term both specifically to reading and writing skills and to other skills beyond reading and writing, as when it is used in terms such as mathematical literacy and scientific literacy, or in semantic name games as, for example, in the term 'numeracy'. The common core in the two different applications of the concept is the functional aspect, including an identification of a societally defined and desired level of competence, and a distinction between individuals who attain this level and those who do not - the functional literates and the functional illiterates.

What is also striking in the rhetoric of the official documents is the attempt to embrace (all) different approaches to literacy by stressing that the understanding of literacy is "broad". This strategy, aiming at generating one unifying and often named "balanced" construction of literacy, demonstrates the ideological contests about the conceptions of literacy. This introduction of a "broad" and "balanced" construction of literacy tends to move the concept of literacy beyond discussion, taking for granted what counts as literacy. This reduction of the complexity around literacy could easily lead to a situation where it becomes difficult for researchers and others to challenge the official construction of literacy.

Political actions in the wake of the literacy crisis

A considerable amount of political action has been taken to overcome the proclaimed literacy crisis. One of the most remarkable things to happen was the preparation of a national action plan on reading, language tests in kindergartens, national tests, and book-start campaigns, providing book-packages to families in socially deprived residential areas. Some of these actions were more or less explicitly directed towards migrant children, while others were of a more general character.

Table 1. Political actions in the wake of the literacy crisis

Political action	Target group	Year of implementation
National action plan on reading		2003
One extra lesson in Danish (reading)	First grade	2006 –
	Second grade	2007 –
	Third grade	2008 –
National tests (reading)	Second, fourth, sixth, eight grade	2010 –
Pre-reading instruction	Kindergarten class	2005
Language screening	Kindergarten: three year old children	
	Bilingual children (compulsory)	2003 –
	All children (optional)	2007 –
Book-start campaigns	At home: six month old, one year old, one and a half year old, three year old children	2008 – 2011

These actions are fundamentally inscribed in the functional paradigm which conceives of literacy as human capital and defines its aims in terms of the minimal levels of reading and writing skills required of the individual to function in work and as a citizen. As a consequence, the emphasis is on what are supposed to be the basic literacy skills and the development of different standardisation policies.

As one of the first political actions taken to overcome the literacy crisis, a report on reading was produced by a committee under the Ministry of Education set up to recommend ways of improving the reading competencies of the Danish population.

In the context of this functional paradigm, the role of primary schooling is reduced to providing the pupils with the most basic of the basics - that is sound-to-letter-correspondences and elementary decoding skills; related to the alphabetic principles as realised in the Danish writing system. This is followed by a focus on reading comprehension, understood as extracting information from written texts.

One extra lesson in Danish was allocated in the first, the second and the third grade, supposed to be used for training reading skills. In addition, compulsory computer-adaptive tests in reading and a number of other subjects in second, fourth, sixth and eighth grade were decided upon in 2006. To prepare all children for this, a decision was made to introduce a pre-reading programme in kindergarten classes and to conduct a language test on all three-year-old children. The purpose of this test was a so-called early identification of children at risk of reading failure. In 2007, the Danish municipalities were delegated the obligation to offer all parents a language screening of their 3 year old children.

The argumentation for this language screening was as follows:

Report from the committee for the preparation of a national action plan on reading

"Research indicates that children who need language stimulation must be helped as early as possible. Language screening is a good tool for finding those children who have an insufficient vocabulary and therefore might have problems developing functional reading skills later on". (Undervisningsministeriet / Ministry of Education 2005b: 8 - our translation).

The construction of causality between an insufficient vocabulary and functional reading skills suggests that receptive knowledge of words frequently used in Danish is the single most important precursor to literacy, and that good language proficiency is equal to possessing a large vocabulary.

The idea that children at risk of reading failure need help as soon as possible is accentuated in the latest political literacy initiative. In 2008, a four year book-start campaign was initiated which aimed at stimulating early literacy in children from socially deprived residential areas, which is usually associated with the presence of a large number of migrants. The basis of the campaign is the provision of book packages to parents and children in such areas. When the children are 6 months old the families are visited for the first time by a librarian from the local library. These visits take place four times until the child reaches the age of 3 years, provided the family accepts the offer.

The underlying objectives of the campaign are described as contributing towards breaking a negative social heritage and providing raw material for the "Bildung" of the children by stimulating the acquisition of the Danish language and by inviting the children into a culture in which books play an important role.

The social expectations embedded in this campaign are expressed very clearly, for example, in this press release from the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media.

Press release: Book-start helps children get going

"Children love it when their fathers and mothers read them a bedtime story but some families don't have a tradition of having fun with books." (Styrelsen for Bibliotek og Medier / Danish Agency for Libraries and Media 02.03.09 - our translation).

The number of stereotypes and implicit beliefs in this statement are significant. This rhetoric constructs a specific norm for being good parents by pointing out particular literacy practices deemed necessary to show love for your children. It further reflects the firm belief that specific literacy practices will have a positive impact on the social status of the children in the family.

Some implications for migrants

The pedagogical decisions and recommendations about how to begin to teach reading are clearly rooted in a so-called reading readiness tradition, together with a cognitive and monolingual perspective on reading. Such cognitive reading readiness perspective on literacy has a considerable impact on the view of biliteracy, and on bilingual children's literacy learning and teaching. First, it

means that literacy is established as something universal and as a mental and language independent phenomenon. At the same time, it is linked to a specific language – in this case Danish –, which therefore is naturalised. It means that the school might actually fail to acknowledge that not all children start school with mother tongue skills in that specific language. In this way, it is taken for granted that literacy teaching is about adding graphic signs to a well-known language. It is presumed that all children understand the majority language, just as it is taken for granted that all children master the syntax and the morphology of the language. At the same time, it means that the children's previous literacy experiences tend to be overlooked, and that the children's multilingual experiences and their emergent understanding of different ways of representing the alphabetic principle in different languages, and quite different ways of using signs in other writing systems, are not seen as part of mainstream education. Recent studies on literacy development among young emergent bilinguals (Bialystok 1997; Kenner 2004; Kenner et al. 2004; Moll et al. 2001; Laursen 2008, 2009, 2010) illustrate how emergent biliterate children are constantly engaging with complex interpretations of different writing systems, and transferring their knowledge about print and orthography between languages. If this research is not taken into account, it is unlikely that bilingual children will be invited to use their bilingualism as a springboard for learning to read and write, and as a way of enhancing their language awareness and metalinguistic knowledge.

The national tests in reading can also illustrate how literacy actions taken to improve literacy are incapable of capturing the complexity of migrant literacy. The national tests have a multiple-choice format, which is a specific problem in relation to migrant children. A wrong answer in a literacy test would normally be interpreted as an expression of reading disabilities, but in relation to migrant children, it may only be the indication of an inability to understand a specific word or sequence in Danish. In other words, the test format cannot discriminate between a wrong answer due to a lack of reading skills and a wrong answer due to a lack of second language competence. Consequently, the teacher's feedback on, and instruction of, the migrant child will be impacted and will not be precisely targeted towards the migrant child's linguistic or more fundamental needs regarding reading. Many migrant children will most likely produce rather poor scores in the computer-adaptive test because, for many migrant children, the test is both a test in language and in literacy. Migrant children will typically take more time completing the tests, and a number of non-answers or wrong answers will not be due to a lack of subject knowledge, but will relate to conditions of language (Holm 2009a). The migrant children might be unable to answer a question, not because they do not know the answer, but because they do not know the Danish words used in the test item, or because they might not be able to produce the answer in a way that corresponds to the norms of Danish language use in the test. This will probably create an over-representation of migrant children in the lowest scoring groups. Thus the tests in literacy may lead to an unfair negative categorisation that might have severe effects on the self-esteem of migrant children and on teachers' expectations regarding this specific group of pupils.

The limited space for migrants is also quite clear in relation to the language screenings in kindergartens. The language screening is conducted in Danish and reflects words, values and practices associated with a childhood in a Danish middle class context. Migrant children's knowledge of words in other languages

than Danish, or knowledge of more culturally specific words and practices, is neglected in the language screenings (Holm 2009b). For the migrant child, the language screening signals what the values of the institution are, and which is the important language, and what counts as being “normal”. For the employees in the kindergarten, the language screenings legitimate language pedagogy that focuses heavily on the receptive knowledge of words in Danish (Holm 2009c).

The socialisation into what are assumed normal middle class literacy practices is - as previously described - initiated in the early childhood. It is furthermore characteristic that the initiatives aimed at the pre-school years are more or less explicitly targeted at migrant children. Language screening is only compulsory for migrants and, in the description of the book-start campaign, it is explicitly mentioned that two-thirds of the children taking part in the campaign are expected to be migrants. Furthermore, the rhetoric clearly indicates that children from socially deprived residential areas are more or less synonymous with migrant children. The book-start campaign clearly points out which specific literacy experiences migrant children ought to have before encountering Danish institutions. It indicates what counts as literacy and the types of literacy practises that are specifically valued. However, experiencing the right literacy practices by reading bedtime stories is not by itself enough to meet the expectations of the book-start campaign. It appears that the only language represented in the book packages is Danish.

Thus, looking into the view of literacy in the educational initiatives it appears that this particular view of literacy seems to foster different kinds of “disqualification of pupils linguistic and literacy resources” (Blommaert et al. 2006).

Concluding remarks

Literacy has become an increasingly important feature of the Danish educational discourse and functions as a mobilizing metaphor in a cluster of positive laden keywords such as ‘national competitiveness’, ‘democracy’, ‘social integration’ and ‘economic wealth’. The linkage of literacy to the concept of functionality – with reference to the achievement of specific literacy abilities, which an individual is supposed to have in order to fulfil a given socio-economic role in society – locates presumed poor literacy results in a societal crisis discourse and in a broader political agenda. It also makes it possible to create a new category of individuals – ‘the functional illiterates’ and to identify a special risk group – ‘the migrants’. This categorization and identification of migrants as a particular group of underachievers is made possible by narrowing down the understanding of literacy to a reading competence that can be measured and compared through international surveys.

In order to understand the nature and impact of the Danish literacy crisis it is important to draw attention to the fact that the point of departure for the construction of the crisis was the Danish ranking in an international survey. Thus, the construction of the crisis was based neither on empirical investigations of decreasing levels of literacy in the population, nor on empirical research results showing a gap between demands for literacy competencies in society and the general level of literacy in the population. According to Welch and

Freebody's discussions (1993) of the possible reasons behind literacy crises, the Danish construction of a literacy crisis may be seen as an ideological phenomenon aimed at changing societally powerful pedagogical and educational values and practices.

The ideological nature of the construction of a literacy crisis is seen in the argument of the crises and in the specific understanding of literacy embedded in the political actions taken. In the political rhetoric, the national literacy level is assumed to be a crucial factor when it comes to maintaining a society's position in the top tiers of the global economy. This thinking potentially represents an assumption of an immediate correlation between the literacy level in a society and the economic wealth of that society. A possible correlation of that nature has been researched and discussed for years and multiple inquiries have illustrated that there is no automatic and straightforward correlation between the national literacy level and the economic wealth of a country (Graff 1994; Holme 2004). Concerning the initiatives taken to overcome the literacy crisis, they all reflect and relate to a specific functional concept of literacy. This conception refers to the idea that literacy is a neutral skill that can be defined, described, learned, and measured as a universal phenomenon separately from the local context.

The political answer to the crisis has been a number of strategic educational initiatives with 'migrants' as a central target group. For migrants, the construction of a literacy crisis means an increasing pressure to adjust and adapt to a monolingual standard of literacy, and to certain valued literacy practices. The ideological construction of the Danish literacy crisis seems to function as a lever for introducing a standard of literacy that is discursively constructed as universal and not negotiable. Thus, this concept reduces the complexity of literacy and may lead to the increased classification and marginalisation of migrants.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

References

- Barton, D. 1994. *Literacy. An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Berlingske Tidende, 13.01.2005. Hver fjerde skoleelev kan knap nok læse.
- Bialystok, E. 1997. Effects of Bilingualism and Biliteracy on Children's Emerging Concepts of Print. *Developmental Psychology*, 33 (3), 429-440.
- Blommaert, J., L. Creve & E. Willaert. 2006. On being declared illiterate: Language-ideological disqualification in Dutch classes for immigrants in Belgium. *Language and Communication*, 26, 34-54.
- Cope, B. & M. Kalantzis (eds.) 2000. *Multiliteracies. Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Egelund, N & B. C. Rangvid. 2005. *PISA - København 2004. Kompetencer hos elever i 9. klasse I København*. København: akf forlaget.
- Gebhard, M. 2004. Fast Capitalism, School Reform, and Second Language Literacy Practices. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88 (2), 245-265.
- Goody, J. 1987. *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, J. 1999. The Implications of Literacy. In D. A. Wagner, R. L. Venezky & B. Street (eds.), *Literacy: An international Handbook*. London: Westview Press, 29-33.
- Graff, H. J. 1994. Literacy, myths and legacies: lessons from the history of literacy. In L. Verhoeven (ed.), *Functional literacy. Theoretical issues and educational implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 37-60.
- Holm, L. 2004. *Hvilken vej ind i hvilken skriftlighed?* København: DPU's Forlag.
- Holm, L. 2006. Forskningsmæssige tilgange til literacy. In M. Ellvin (ed.), *Ord och bild ger mening*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 20-34.
- Holm, L. 2009a. Who evaluates the evaluation? An analysis of computer-adaptive testing using literacy as an example. *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 29, 137-148.
- Holm, L. 2009b. Sproglig evaluering i daginstitutioner. In L. Holm & H. P. Laursen (eds.), *En bog om sprog - i daginstitutioner. Analyser af sprog som social praksis*. København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsforlag, 101-125.
- Holm, L. 2009c. Evaluering af sprogvurderingsmaterialer i daginstitutioner: en undersøgelse af sproglig vurderingspraksis i Københavns Kommune. [Retrieved July 31, 2009]. Available at https://pure.dpu.dk/ws/fbspretrieve/367/Evaluering_af_sprogvurderingsmaterialer.doc
- Holme, R. 2004. *Literacy. An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Jensen, T. P. 2002. Literacy. In Undervisningsministeriet, Nøglekompetencer - forskerbidrag til Det Nationale Kompetenceregnskab. København: Undervisningsministeriet. [Retrieved June 21, 2009]. Available at <http://pub.uvm.dk/2002/nkr/dokumentationsrapport/2.html>
- Jyllandsposten, 06.12.2004. DA: uacceptable PISA-placeringer.
- Jyllandsposten, 12.01.2005. Københavnske elever læser dårligere end i Brasilien.
- Jyllandsposten, 09.05.2007. Indvandrerbørn forlader skolen uden at kunne læse.
- Kenner, C. 2004. *Becoming biliterate. Young children learning different writing systems*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Kenner, C., G. Kress, H. Al-Khatib, R. Kam & K. Tsai. 2004. Finding the Keys to Biliteracy: How Young Children Interpret Different Writing Systems. *Language and Education*, 18 (2), 124-144.
- Kress, G. 2002. English for an era of instability: Aesthetics, ethics, creativity, and design. *English in Australia*, 134, 15-23.
- Kristeligt Dagblad, 08.12.2004. Fogh foreslår national handleplan for læsning.
- Laursen, H. P. (ed.) 2008. Tegn på sprog. Tosprogede børn lærer at læse og skrive. Statusrapport 1. [Retrieved December 4, 2009]. Available at <http://didak.ucc.dk/public/dokumenter/Afdelinger/didak/Statusrapport%20oktober%202008.pdf>
- Laursen, H. P. (ed.) 2009. Tegn på sprog. Tosprogede børn lærer at læse og skrive. Statusrapport 2. [Retrieved December 4, 2009]. Available at

- <http://didak.ucc.dk/public/dokumenter/Afdelinger/didak/Statusrapport%20oktober%202009.pdf>
- Laursen, H. P. (ed.) 2010. Tegn på sprog. Tosprogede børn lærer at læse og skrive. Statusrapport 3. [Retrieved October 14, 2010]. Available at <http://didak.ucc.dk/public/dokumenter/UFEV/UC2/Statusrapport%20oktober%202010.pdf>
- Levine, K. 1994. Functional literacy in a changing world. In L. Verhoeven Ludo (ed.), *Functional literacy. Theoretical issues and educational implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 113–131.
- Moll, L. C., R. Saez & J. Dworin. 2001. Exploring Biliteracy: Two Student Case Examples of Writing as a Social Practice. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101 (4), 435–448.
- OECD. 1996. *Measuring What People Know. Human Capital Accounting for the Knowledge Economy*. Paris.
- OECD. 1997. *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society*. Paris.
- OECD. 1999. *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*. Paris.
- OECD. 2001. *Knowledge and Skills for Life*, Paris.
- OECD. 2003. Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo). Summary of the final report “Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society”. [Retrieved June 21, 2009] Available at http://app.cepcastilleja.org/contenido/ccbb/saber_mas/deseco/5_deseco_final_report.pdf
- OECD. 2005. The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies. Executive Summary. [Retrieved June 21, 2009] Available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/61/35070367.pdf>
- Shore, C & S. Wright. 1997. Policy. A New Field of Anthropology. In C. Shore & S. Wright (eds.), *Anthropology of Policy. Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power*. London: Routledge, 3–42.
- Street, B. 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. 1997. The Implications of the “New Literacy Studies” for Literacy Education. *English in Education*, 31 (3), 45–59.
- Street, B. 2004. Academic literacies and the “new orders”: implications for research and practice in student writing in higher education. *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences*, 1 (1), 9–20.
- Styrelsen for Bibliotek og Medier, 02.03.2009. Pressemeddelelse: Bogstart hjælper folk i gang.
- Undervisningsministeriet 2005a. Det Nationale Kompetenceregnskab – hovedrapport. [Retrieved September 5, 2006]. Available at <http://pub.uvm.dk/2005/NKRrapport/>
- Undervisningsministeriet 2005b. Rapport fra Udvalget til forberedelse af en national handlingsplan for læsning. København: Undervisningsministeriet.
- Verhoeven, L. (ed.) 1994. *Functional literacy. Theoretical issues and educational implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Wedel, J. R., C. Shore, G. Feldman & S. Lathrop. 2005. Towards an Anthropology of Public Policy. *The Annals of the American Academy*, 600, 30–50
- Welch, A. R. & P. Freebody. 1993. Introduction: Explanations of the Current International “Literacy Crises”. In P. Freebody & A. R. Welch (eds.), *Knowledge, Culture and Power: International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice*. London: Falmer Press, 6–22.

Received 18 February, 2010

Revision received 22 February, 2011

Accepted 30 March, 2011