

Literature and Empowerment: A Study of Multicultural Grade Three Classes Overachieving in Reading*

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The objective of this mixed methods study is to gain insights into how teachers can assist their students to become good readers who read with joy and engagement. This study describes multicultural classrooms in a low-SES (socio-economic status) Stockholm area, representing reading communities, where reading fiction is the heartbeat of classroom life. Teachers' ways of relating to their students, their methods and assessment procedures will be discussed. The creation of the classroom climate, the fun factor, parents' roles and collaborative aspects of teachers' work also protruded as major themes in the teachers' narratives. The analyses employ the concepts of the Proximal Zone of Development and Scaffolding from Vygotsky's theories, together with the concepts of weak and strong framing as well as classification from Bernstein's Code Theory. Teachers' ways of relating to phenomena such as deficit syndrome and colour blindness will be analyzed from critical perspectives. Since the practitioner's perspectives are paid much attention to, issues like the need for the employment of broad theoretical perspectives, trans-disciplinary research approaches and mixed methods will also be discussed.

Keywords: empowerment, bilingual readers, elementary school, literacy, literature

Introduction

Predictors of reading achievement such as home literacy environment, early literacy experiences including parent-child interactions, and reading patterns in the home were well established by early researches (Heath, 1983; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). So were linkages between reading achievement and socio-economic factors such as level of parental education, occupation, income and residential setting (Coleman et al., 1966; Priciotta, Flanagan, & Germino, 2006; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). These findings suggesting a strong impact from home literacy activities and socio-economic factors on reading achievements may give rise to deterministic attitudes towards children's possibilities to become proficient readers and even contribute to arguments questioning the role of formal schooling.

However, to succumb to the idea that schooling does not seem to make many differences in accounting for individual differences in reading achievement, would also be to succumb to prevalent power structures, that is, letting patterns of inequity in a society reproduce without further transformative disruptions. The quest to reduce the negative impact of socio-cultural factors on reading achievement has been proven to be an area where teachers' work has a potential to make a difference (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Actions to increase the quality and the quantity of reading instruction have the potential to enhance reading performance in low-SES (i.e., socio-economic status) areas (Sadoski & Wilson, 2006). Highlighting successful educational approaches is a

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way to demonstrate that pedagogy may have transformative effects. The overarching objective in this study was to examine how teachers and their educational practices can make a difference, and also further scrutinize how this pedagogy was enacted by teachers and students, with a particular focus on L2 (second-language) learners.

From Reading to Literacy

Two major poles can be identified in the field of reading theory concerning views on reading and reading acquisition. On the one hand, the metaphor of information transfer dominates, advocating a psycholinguistic view on language as a self-contained symbolic system, where meaning is believed to reside in the text (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). On the other hand, reading is described as participating in a socially, culturally and historically constructed practice (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Functions of literacy are viewed as cultural capital, and as such reflecting relations between knowledge and power (Bourdieu, 1984). In this enlarged definition of literacy, not only the text but also the reader's prior experiences of the world, social identifications, attitudes, and the surrounding culture and society contribute to the constructions of meaning. In the present study, a pragmatic view on reading acquisition was applied, where knowledge was seen as constructed both "in the head" and "in the world" (Gee, 1992, p. 12). However, transactional perspectives on reading development were emphasized, in order to encompass also social, emotional and cultural factors intertwined and interdependent with cognitive factors in a classroom setting (Atkinson, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotskian Theory: The Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

The ZPD (zone of proximal development) is a key concept in this study (Vygotsky, 1978). Standardized tests may be used to establish the individual's lowest level of achievement in the ZPD, often positioning second-language learners as low achievers. However, the teachers' view of a culturally diverse classroom environment as a potential for higher-order conceptual enrichment might set the scene for learning aiming at the upper limit of the ZPD. Culturally, sensitive educational practices might have consequences for students' learning progress, as well as teachers' choices of assessment procedures, instructional methods and materials (Bernard, 2004). More advanced peers, teachers and scaffolding structures mobilize learners to exceed their individual limits of achievement, and thus, facilitating learning both at individual and social level (Vygotsky, 1978).

Critical Language Theory: The Deficit Syndrome and Colour Blindness

As discourses are not equal in school, students with diverse backgrounds and divergent language skills may be subordinated as part of a collective of deficient communicators. Among educators, the deficit syndrome as a discourse emphasizing disabilities rather than abilities was well documented (Au & Raphael, 2000; Heath, 1983; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Shohamy, 2004). Instead, the awareness of children's capabilities and potentials is paramount in creating positive conditions for children's learning processes. The affinity between students' agency and the Vygotskian concept of learning related to the idea of reading proficiency as a presumptive tool for empowerment with regard to students' knowledge of and familiarities with the genres used in school (Bernard, 2004; Cummins, 1996, 2007; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The students who lack discourse skills and knowledge about school and teacher implemented expectations are often disadvantaged in educational settings. Teachers' liberal ways of assuming that all students share similar opportunities are referred to "colour blindness" (Kubota, 2004). By ignoring the power structures in action, marginalized learners become even further marginalized, and students with diverse cultural backgrounds were left in a void, without guidance to acknowledge appropriate behaviour in a school context (Gee, 1996; Giroux, 2001; Siegel, 2006). Linguistic and cognitive development together with code knowledge was described by

Cummins (1996) as joint factors vital to enhance the ownership of language and educational trajectory.

Bernstein's Code Theory: Weak Framing and Swedish Schools

Employing Bernstein's (1971) Code Theory on Swedish schooling rendered a description of classrooms with predominantly weak framing and classification. Students with diverse cultural backgrounds often arrive in Sweden from countries with strong framings, explicit rules and overt expectations. Researches have shown the importance of making invisible codes and expectations clear to those students, in order to enhance their academic successes (Gustavsson, 2001). Educational practices denoted as "your own work", are very common in Swedish schools and may cause problems since students simply do not know what is expected of them (Cederberg, 2006).

Are Schools and Classrooms Making a Difference?

School characteristics. A school policy and a school leadership with a focus on language were features mentioned in several studies of high-achieving schools with multi-cultural student bodies (Cummins, 1996; Hallinger, 2003). Academic emphasis, encompassing high expectations and academic demands, were additional features reoccurring in high-achieving schools (Parker, Hannah, & Topping, 2006).

Classroom characteristics. Situated learning is highly dependent on the affordances offered in the classroom context. Students' perceptions of the school climate as being positive constituted a reoccurring characteristic of high-achieving classes, as were positively perceived relations between the teacher and the students, peer relations and a collaborative rather than a competitive classroom climate (Brophy, 2005; Langer, 1999; Parker et al., 2006). Holistic and interactive approaches to the development of literacy proficiency encouraging higher-order thinking and discussion of ideas have been proven successful in multilingual settings (August, 2006).

The linkage between the amount of reading and students' reading proficiency was well documented (Stanovich, 2000; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). The amount of reading was often viewed as a result of reading in the spare time, but there was evidence that reading in school might serve the same purpose (Barbosa, Ramos, Arájo, & Almeida, 2006). Access to books, free book choices, along with sufficient time designated to reading and discussions of texts are additional features observed in high-achieving classes (Gambrell, 1996).

One approach to reading instruction seldom dominates in high-achieving classes. Cross-curricular connections across grades, subjects and lessons, as well as in and out of school contexts distinguish higher-performing classes (Gambrell, 1996; Hammond, 2001; Langer, 1999).

Culturally sensitive classrooms. Relations to print and also to ways of learning, showed strong linkages to the cultural setting and cultural sensitivity may enforce pedagogy (Au & Raphael, 2000; Cummins, 1996, 2007; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). However, cultural sensitivity may be enacted in several ways. To account for cultural divergences, it is fundamental for literacy acquisition to promote students' understandings of the role and function of print in an educational context. This approach should be well integrated in formal teaching (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Viewing oneself as a reader and a writer also becomes a vital part of one's personal and social growth (Pavlenko, 2002; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Cultural sensitivity also includes relations between home and school, and studies have shown that well established cooperation between parents and teachers promoted students' learning (August, 2006; Baker, 2003; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Van Horn, 2000).

Clearly expressed goals, overt hands-on information about tasks, elements of explicit instruction, role

modelling and sufficient support along with work on language across the curriculum exemplified scaffolding strategies identified to promote L2 learners' literacy developments (Cummins, 1996; Fitzgerald & Noblit, 2000; Gibbons, 2002). In addition, scaffolding progressively adjusted to students' needs plays a major role in the students' reading development (Hammond, 2001). With this respect, the use of dynamic assessment procedures, connected to learning processes, has gained attention as a means to promote L2 learners' reading developments (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Shohamy, 2004). Cummins (1996) emphasised the acquisition of academic language as a threshold to equal educational opportunities. According to Cummins (1996), interaction must be grounded in students' current understandings, and gradually proceed from a contextual level to more de-contextualized levels, providing cognitive and intellectual challenges at appropriate levels.

Literature-based programmes might have positive influences on non-mainstream students' attitudes towards reading, presupposing that their reading acquisition develops successfully (Au & Raphael, 2000; Bernard, 2004; Elley, 1991). Critical skills for reading comprehension related to the habitual reading of fiction, which also affect non-fictional comprehension, are for example knowledge about text-structure, strategies for self-monitoring and integration skills together with growth of the vocabulary (Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004; Collins Block, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2002).

There was also a linkage between L2 learners' oral performances and reading achievements (Holdaway, 1979). For example, L2 learners' engagement in oral activities in daily classroom life, such as drama, has been observed to promote language proficiency (Hammond, 2001; Miller, Heilman, & Nockerts, 2006; Wolf, 1998).

The Present Study

The main objective of this study was to identify students', classrooms', teachers' and teaching characteristics of low-SES, multicultural classes overachieving in reading. One major concern was to avoid the self-evident effects of socio-economic and language factors, and thus, overachieving classes were defined by controlling such factors using regression as well as twin-matching procedures. Questionnaire data addressed differences in students, classrooms, teachers and teaching factors between overachieving classes and control classes matched on SES and language. In addition, interview data were used to explore in more depth how teachers went about in their activities, how the classroom climate was created, and how social interactions among teachers, students and peers were linked to reading development. Thus, teachers' voices were included to complement the statistics and shed light on the research questions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Method

Participants

In an earlier study comprising a total of 1,092 classes at Grade 3 (i.e., nine years old children) in the Stockholm area, Sweden, 94 OA-classes (overachieving classes) and 94 underachieving UA-classes in reading comprehension were identified after matching for SES and language backgrounds (Damber, Samuelsson & Taube, in press). Based on regression analyses, overachieving classes were those performing well above (positive residuals above the 85th percentile) the expected mean reading performance predicted by one index of SES, number of books in the home. This index of SES was validated by high correlations between the number of books on the one hand and parental income and educational level on the other hand (the correlation coefficient, r , varies from 0.56 to 0.68, on a scale where r ranges from -1 to +1; +1 = perfect correlation, -1 = inverse correlation) with an average correlation of 0.62. Underachieving classes were those performing well below (negative residuals below the 15th percentile) their expected level. In addition, these OA-classes and

UA-classes were also matched on language background using a twin-matching procedure so that the percentage of students with Swedish as a L2 within classes was equal across groups.

A closer examination of all 94 OA-classes revealed a number of classes from one particular low-SES school district with high percentages of students with diverse cultural and language backgrounds. There were a total of 68 out of 1,092 classes in this school district. Of the 68 classes in this area, 38 classes performed as predicted based on SES and language background, and 22 classes were underachieving. However, there were eight classes within this school district with a mean reading performance clearly above their predicted level. These eight OA-classes were targeted in the present study.

In order to add to the quantitative descriptions of the OA-classes ($N = 8$), a group of 100 control classes were selected from the original sample ($N = 1,092$). These control classes were matched with the eight OA-classes on the number of books in the home, the percentage of parents with at least post-secondary education, family income in terms of percentage of families with a yearly income exceeding 360 thousand Swedish kronors, and the percentage of students with Swedish as a second language (Stockholm Office of Research and Statistics, 2007). The remaining classes were used as a reference group ($N = 984$). Group characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviations (Within Parenthesis) on Reading Comprehension, Indexes on SES and Language, for Overachieving Classes and the Control Group Matched on SES and Language. Reference Classes' Results Are Also Reported

Matching variables	OA-classes ($N = 8$)	Control group ($N = 100$)	Cohen's d	t -test	Reference classes ($N = 984$)
Reading test results	22.08 (1.48)	18.29 (2.81)	1.69	3.76**	20.72 (2.3)
Number of books	79 (51)	104 (50)	0.50	1.36	171 (65)
Percent of parent education (%)	31.19 (8.80)	27.37 (9.41)	0.42	1.11	41.1 (13.1)
Family income (%)	4.78 (3.31)	3.77 (3.44)	0.30	0.80	9.26 (6.53)
Other first language (%)	65.69 (35.06)	65.71 (20.36)	0.00	0.00	16.0 (20.2)

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Cohen's d was used as an effect size measure.

Six informants active in the eight OA-classes were subjected to in-depth interviews. These informants were fully informed about the project, participated voluntarily and were reported back to, in order to ensure the acceptance of the authors' descriptions (Kvale, 1996). Three teachers, one librarian, one preschool teacher and one programme administrator were interviewed, all of whom with many years' experience.

Reading Comprehension Test, Student Questionnaire and Teacher Questionnaire

Reading comprehension test. The reading test consisted of a paper-and-pencil test with six texts from the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) reading literacy study conducted in 1990/1991 (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement). The maximum score was 26 points. The domains of reading materials, intending to reflect different aspects of reading comprehension, were narrative prose (two texts including 11 items), expository prose (one text including six items) and documents, such as a map and a schedule (three texts including nine items).

Student and teacher questionnaire. A student questionnaire containing 31 questions focusing on background data, self-rated reading ability, reading behaviour, access to books and daily papers, parents' story

book reading and satisfaction in relation to school work and peers was administered. Eight of the questions were dichotomous, one of the questions was continuous variable and 22 of the questions employed a Likert-scale. In addition, a teacher questionnaire with a total of 29 questions was used covering background data, years of education and teacher experience, years in the class, perceived needs and problems, degree of parental cooperation, perceptions of relations, students' attitudes and working climate. Information about the class, such as the class size, questions related to teacher instructions, aims for teaching, methods used and assessment routines were also included. When examining the use of methods to stimulate reading, the answers reported the frequency of the use. In the question examining goals for reading instruction, the teachers were asked to rank different alternatives, 14 of the questions were dichotomous, eight of the questions were continuous variables and six of the questions employed a Likert-scale.

In-Depth Interviews

Telephone interviews were performed, recorded and transcribed. Translations into English were made by the author. Interviews have lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. Although the interview guide was thematically structured (collaborative aspects, parental contacts, use of methods, etc.), the aim was to let the dialogue spin off naturally, with the participants directing the course, since the participants' voices and perspectives were at focus. The interview guide was used to check that all the themes were covered. In order to make sure that answers were interpreted according to the interviewees' intentions, follow-up questions were subsequently asked (Kvale, 1996). As a school's collective memory is believed to stretch back in time for 8-10 years, also former experiences of the members of staff are still accessible to the interviewer (Mosenthal, Lipson, Tomcello, & Mekkelsen, 2004). The interview data were compared, coded and categorized with respect to its contents.

Statistical Procedures

As it appeared neither possible, nor meaningful to report all the results, only significant differences between the OA-classes and the control classes were reported in the tables. As the results from the student questionnaire showed no significant differences, those results were only commented upon. *T*-values were calculated to explore the mean differences between OA-classes and the control classes, and Cohen's *d* was used as an effect size measure. A high value on any variable derived from the two questionnaires equals positive attitudes, positive conditions, high priorities, etc.. Findings reaching significance using *t*-tests are given priority. However, the author has chosen to comment on some non-significant results with an effect size exceeding 0.50 to cover aspects emphasised as important by the informants.

Statistical Results

Non-significant Differences

No significant differences between the OA-classes and the control classes were found concerning students' characteristics such as home literacy environment indicated by measures of access to a daily paper, books in the home and literacy events in the home as parents' story book reading in pre-school. On measures of voluntary reading and early reading abilities, such as being able to read letters and words before school start, no significant differences were found. Neither any differences indicated on measures of self-rated reading ability. However, the effect size measure indicated impact on the measure of self-rated reading ability (0.79), which was perceived as better by the students in the OA-classes. Also, on the measure of a number of students receiving special education in Swedish, an impact was indicated by the effect size measure (0.63) with less

students in the OA-classes receiving special education even though the differences between the OA-classes and the control classes were not significant.

On the measures of classroom characteristics, no significant differences were indicated on a majority of the questions. No differences were found concerning class characteristics, such as the class size, multi-graded classroom organisation, the number of teachers in the class or the percentage of children with reading or writing difficulties. No significant differences were found on access to special education teachers, home language teachers or other teacher resources. Neither any difference was indicated on measures of access to school or classroom library, nor did students' attitudes towards school work differ significantly though the effect size measure indicated some impact (0.82), attitudes being more positive in the OA-classes.

Concerning the teachers' and teaching characteristics often debated factors such as teacher education, in-service training and teacher continuity, they showed no significant differences. Neither significant difference was found between the classes on the measures of parental contacts, nor did the measures of aims of the teachers reading instructions or their perceptions of the Swedish lessons show any differences. On the measure of the teachers' perceptions of students' needs of special education in Swedish, an impact of the differences was indicated by the effect size measure (0.69), these needs were perceived as lower in the OA-classes. On one measure of teachers' frequency of using different methods to stimulate reading and the writing of book reviews, there was also an impact (1.3) as shown by the effect size measure, this activity being more frequent in OA-classes, even though no significant differences were indicated.

Significant Differences

Apart from two measures of classroom characteristics, students' perceptions of peer relations being more positive, and teachers' perceptions of their possibility to meet the demands in the classroom, all the other significant differences concerned with teachers' and teaching characteristics.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviations (Within Parenthesis) on Students' Characteristics of Overachieving Classes and the Control Group Matched on SES and Language. Reference Classes' Results Are Also Reported

Students' characteristics	OA-classes (N = 8)	Control group (N = 100)	Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>t</i> -test	Reference classes (N = 984)
Students' reading & writing difficulties and Swedish as first language (%)	2.50 (5.59)	15.58 (19.36)	0.92	1.90	9.50 (11.6)
Number of students receiving special education in Sweden	1.38 (1.69)	2.82 (2.78)	0.63	1.44	2.10 (1.85)
Self-rated reading ability	9.45 (0.55)	8.91 (0.80)	0.79	1.87	9.31 (0.71)
Parents' story book reading (pre-school)	2.57 (0.25)	2.39 (0.42)	0.52	1.19	2.61 (0.42)

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; In the reported results, the impact of Cohen's *d* exceeded 0.50.

Classroom characteristics. Significant differences were indicated between the measures of peer relations and teachers' perceived possibility to meet demands in the classroom. Students' attitudes were perceived as more positive in the overachieving classes compared with the control group.

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviations (Within Parenthesis) on Classroom Characteristics of Overachieving Classes and the Control Group Matched on SES and Language. Reference Classes' Results Are Also Reported

Classroom characteristics	OA-classes (N = 8)	Control group (N = 100)	Cohen's d	t-test	Reference classes (N = 984)
Students					
Peer relations	2.73 (0.14)	2.50 (0.21)	1.29	3.04**	2.69 (0.19)
Teachers					
Students' attitudes	17.71 (1.50)	16.08 (2.41)	0.81	1.90	17.01(1.92)
Meet demands	29.38 (2.97)	25.48 (4.28)	1.06	2.52*	27.31(3.84)

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; In the reported results, the impact of Cohen's d exceeded 0.50.

Teachers' and teaching characteristics. OA-teachers had on average a job experience which was eight years longer than those in the control group. No significant differences were indicated between measures of teacher education, aims of the teaching of reading or methods used for reading instruction. The results of the measure on methods used for reading instruction indicated that 39% of the control group used several basals, compared to none of the OA-teachers. Significant differences were also indicated among measures of procedures of assessment, OA-teachers consequently use the same assessment procedures. In the frequencies of the use of methods to stimulate reading, significant differences in dramatizing stories, writing letters to the author, and the author's visits were indicated, these methods being more frequent in the overachieving classes compared with the control group.

Table 4

Mean and Standard Deviations (Within Parenthesis) on Classroom Characteristics, Teacher and Teaching Characteristics for Overachieving Classes and the Control Group Matched on SES and Language. Reference Classes' Results Are Also Reported

Variables	OA-classes (N = 8)	Control group (N = 100)	Cohen's d	t-test	Reference classes (N = 984)
Classroom characteristics:					
Students' perceptions of peer relations	2.7 (0.1)	2.5 (0.2)	1.29	3.04**	2.7 (0.2)
Teachers' perceptions of student attitudes	17.7 (1.5)	16.1 (2.4)	0.81	1.90	17.0 (1.9)
Teachers' perceptions of possibilities to meet demands	29.4 (2.9)	25.5 (4.3)	1.11	2.52*	27.3 (3.8)
Teacher and teaching characteristics:					
Teacher experience (years)	22.6 (12.5)	14.6 (9.7)	0.71	2.19*	15.5 (11.1)
Need of extra resources	1.5 (0.8)	2.5 (1.4)	0.88	2.02*	1.0 (1.2)
Reading instruction using several basals	1.0 (0.0)	1.4	3.11	2.24**	1.4 (0.0)
Flexibility in use of assessment procedures	2.6 (0.5)	3.8 (1.0)	1.50	3.41**	3.8 (1.1)
Methods stimulating reading such as:					
Dramatizing stories	1.1 (0.4)	0.8 (0.5)	0.88	2.13*	0.7 (0.5)
Writing book reviews	1.1 (0.4)	0.8 (0.8)	1.30	1.29	1.1 (0.7)
Letters to the author	0.6 (0.8)	0.1 (0.3)	0.83	3.94**	0.1 (0.3)
Author's visits	0.6 (0.7)	0.2 (0.4)	0.73	2.67**	0.2 (0.5)

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; In the reported results, the impact of Cohen's d exceeded 0.50.

Joint Analyses of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The statistical results and the contents of the interviews were analyzed in the light of one another to enable a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative results. Quotations encompassing views expressed by all informants were cited in the text without individual references. Five major themes gradually emerged.

Participating in reading communities. The picture of reading and learning communities emanated with the reading of fiction as the heartbeat of the classroom life. Fiction created a shared frame of reference for literacy activities, providing individual, interpersonal and transactional experiences and learning. On a daily basis, time was designated to silent reading which supported earlier findings that the link between the amount of readings and reading achievements could be sustained by classroom work (Barbosa, Ramos, Arájo, & Almeida, 2006).

Statistics indicated restricted use of pull-out strategies and low needs for extra resources, according to teachers' perceptions. Those results were in concordance with teachers' voices depicting classrooms where inclusion was the motto, whatever language level students were at. Group work, pair work such as pair reading and individual work were employed in rather equal proportions. The setting was described in the following way:

The aim is to let every child feel competent... This thing is about having read a book. No matter how tiny it is. You have read it. You understand some of it. You could express it in words and tell others about it... To write or express orally... or to dramatize or draw a picture. Everybody could find their places irrespective of their language levels. (Teacher's narration)

Interviews revealed a massive encounter with print, starting already in pre-school: books, authentic messages on the white board, scribbling, memorizing stories, pretended reading, multi-modal activities promoting print awareness and curiosity about print, to enhance further development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Classrooms provided lots of affordances. A multitude of books, on divergent topics and language levels to satisfy all the needs, provided reading materials, which was a feature described as a characteristic of classrooms with high achieving readers (Gambrell, 1996; Mosenthal, Lipson, Tomcello, & Mekkelsen, 2004; Langer, 1999). The availability of reading materials, according to free choice and irrespective of language level, supported learning experiences in the ZPD. Teachers described how a few classroom rules in combination with a very deliberate work on self-reliance and acceptance of all peers helped create a positive classroom climate, a result was also sustained by statistics. Peace and quiet characterized the classrooms, and positive feedback was emphasised, especially in the first stage of learning, since the teachers were well aware of the different stages in L2 learning (Pienemann & Håkansson, 1999).

Oral activities were given high priority with great acceptance of the diverging language levels students were at, thus encouraging the sound of multiple voices in the classroom and paying attention to the linkages between oral proficiency and reading proficiency (Gibbons, 2002; Miller et al., 2006). One interviewee commented that they got very good at that... to speak in front of an audience... We had this idea, that once a day everybody should say something (BA).

The use of drama encouraged students to take other persons' perspectives and helped shy children to participate as "someone else", thus building self-confidence in oral performances. An extended understanding of texts, is another outcome of the use of drama as described by Wolf (1998), in line also with the principles guiding Swedish experienced-based reading acquisition.

The link between teachers' extended teaching experiences and teachers' abilities to adjust to all the

students' needs deserves attention. Teachers' large toolboxes, the ability to choose relevant methods and materials, and flexibly arrange the classroom organization facilitated teachers to let literacy activities link to students' prior knowledge, and in this way, prior experiences were gradually extended to the unknown and more abstract (Cummins, 1996; Gibbons, 2006; Hammond, 2001).

The “fun factor”. The word “fun” was a frequently reoccurring word in all interviews:

We just had so much fun. The children even thought that the other teachers and I lived together because we were working in the evenings at her house. But we enjoyed our work so much... And every morning they were there before us, the children were Happy. Always so happy. They really liked coming to school. (Teacher's narration)

The belief that what can not be achieved today can be achieved tomorrow is reflected by the fact that students carefully chose books almost too hard to read, as they very deliberately strived forward, according to the informants. All informants held the belief that there was no contradiction between the hard work and the fun work. However, work considered being tedious by the teachers, like sounding out on a regular basis, was omitted. Students' reactions to tasks guided the teachers' choices of methods and materials.

Voluntary reading, discriminatory of over-achieving classes in the first study, showed no significant differences between over-achievers and the control group in the follow-up study. However, interviews alluded to the “fun factor”. Reading was a valued activity, and many readings took place during lessons. In addition, fiction was assigned as home work, even during vacations, to help students catch up with their native Swedish peers. One interviewee commented: “We felt like we had no time to lose... each child needed to know what to do next or what to work more with before moving on. Forward, forward”.

The students enjoyed this homework and even asked for it, if the teacher would forget to assign homework. Thus the large amount of readings needed to automatize the reading process was provided (Stanovich, 2000; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004).

The introduction of the first person-perspective in more advanced writing was described as a turning point for both the engagement and the development of writing skills. When a text was read, the children took on the perspective of one of the characters in the story and then wrote a new story employing the first person-perspective. One informant gave the following description:

Then something really happened with their languages. The texts got so fascinating. I believe it had something to do with the students having knowledge about what they were going to write about. The spelling word “they” could take on a double perspectives. The character and I. I believe that this made them feel like real authors. (Teacher's narration)

Students obviously felt part of the community of readers and writers (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). One of the interviewees alluded to the ZPD: “And you can't write the wrong things, because when you use the first person perspective... it can't get wrong! ”.

Letting the students develop their reading skills within the realms of their own ZPD enabled them to experience the joy of success (Vygotsky, 1978).

Collaboration. Collaborative aspects, enhancing both students' and teachers' work and learning, protruded as a major feature (Vygotsky, 1978). Linkages between a collaborative classroom climate and high reading achievement were shown by earlier researches (Brophy, 2005; Parker, Hannah, & Topping, 2006; Wigfield et al., 2004), and this aspect was stressed by all informants, although several forms of classroom work were employed. Collaborative teacher work also protruded as a characteristic feature of schools where the students over-achieved in reading (Mosenthal, 2004). Evidently, the cooperation among the librarian, the

preschool teachers, the leisure time assistants and the teachers were prerequisites to enable individualized scaffolding. All collaborators would exceed their professional roles when were needed. Collaboration as a condition for imaginative thinking was also put forward: "Imagination is a key word. If you run out of imagination... then nothing will happen... but you need other people around you".

This excerpt indicated the awareness among the teachers of the relationship between imaginative thinking and creative teaching.

Collaboration with the parents was the success factor most emphasized by the informants. Statistics revealed shared reading in pre-school was a discriminate distinctive feature of over-achieving classes, though low values were indicated for this measure on classes with the similar language and socio-economic backgrounds in the preceding study.

Interviews revealed that parents were invited from the start to participate in the reading communities as collaborators. At frequently occurring, short, formal parents' evenings, explicit hands-on information about which fruitful assistance parents could provide were communicated by the teachers. Also, affective qualities in shared reading were emphasised, not only skill-and-drill (Baker, 2003). These meetings were not social events, but provided straight information about the children's reading progress, current tasks and projects. Tasks were assigned to the parents, also in their mother tongue. One of the informants who were not a teacher explained how her confidence in the teachers was built up:

These teachers... proper... they looked like our traditional teachers, real teachers. They had authority as teachers. It's something about that. They (the parents) had confidence in the methods these teachers employed... and they had homework every day. From the first day of school. (Informants' narration)

Reading journals were going back and forth between the school and the home, thus ensuring the children that their attainments were seen, but also strengthening the ties between the home and the school. All informants mentioned the deep mutual trust that developed between the parents and the teachers relations contributing to a positive learning environment for the children (August, 2006; Cummins, 1996; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Van Horn, 2000).

Avoiding colour blindness. The same explicitness as in the parental communications also characterized the communications and the instructions of the students. The expectations were made clear. Consistency in management techniques made procedures clear:

Every new task we introduced very elaborately. Then we repeated everything exactly, the next day. Every morning we explained what was going to happen during the day. And we explained that we might not have time enough to finish it all. But then we would continue the next day, so that they felt that security... the children always knew what was expected of them. (Teacher's narration)

Imitative elements were tied to the language acquisition processes, known to enhance the internalization of language structures (Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). How strategies for reading comprehension were implemented was described by one of the interviewees: "Strategies for understanding... Read, retell, summarize and write. Read, retell, summarize and write. This constant summarizing... it results in reading comprehension".

The repeat of the activities evoked a feeling of security among the students. The learning outcome was knowledge about the text structure, integration skills and comprehension monitoring, all critical skills for reading comprehension (Collins Block, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2002; Cain et al., 2004).

From pre-school and onwards, the librarian and the teacher functioned as role models in giving “Book Talks”, an instructional strategy linked to effective literacy instruction (Collins Block et al., 2002; Gambrell, 1996; Gibbons, 2002). In giving their own “Book Talks”, students earned proficiency as oral presenters, thus opening a gate way to the Swedish academic codes where oral presentations played an important role.

Teachers’ scaffolding also included assistance usually performed by parents in all-Swedish classes, such as instructions on grammar, spelling and vocabulary options, all crucial elements for L2 learners to acquire as effectively as possible (Hammond, 2001; Gibbons, 2002). In the employment of process writing, those needs were taken account of:

Many teachers let their students write freely. So did our children, but we were quite tough in correcting. Because there was no one else to tell them about the conventions concerning sentence building, inflections, vocabulary... So we made them correct the mistakes. And rewrite. And then they had to correct the mistakes. And rewrite (laughter). (Teacher’s narration)

The combination of Bernstein’s (1971) concepts of strong framing and weak classification got a new connotation in these classrooms. The combination of strong framing and weak classification appeared in this context as a culturally sensitive and transitory phase in the students’ educational trajectories. The strong framing, such as elements of direct instruction and explicit communication, satisfied the needs of the students and did not abandon them in a linguistic void (Au & Raphael, 2000; Cummins, 1996; Gibbons, 2002; Kubota, 2004). Simultaneously, weak classification such as cross-curricular connections, thematic work and the use of authentic literature instead of basals, created an interactional and transactional learning space where students were prepared for further Swedish schooling. Hence, language served as a tool in the process of empowerment (Freire, 1998).

Resisting the deficit syndrome. Teachers’ trust in their students’ capabilities is reflected in the statistical measures of self-reliance and the avoidance of pull-out strategies. The combination of appropriate scaffolding, teachers’ high demands and high expectations communicated a perspective for the future, thus helping students strive for the upper limit of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher’s voice represented the view held by the informants: “Children have such capacities. They can handle so much... and if they get proper support. But you have to believe in them”.

The only test aiming at the lower limit of the ZPD the students encountered was the test employed in this study. On other occasions, dynamic assessment procedures were employed to enhance the perspective for the future, leaving the students with their self-confidence intact, in accordance with research promoting such assessment procedures, especially when L2 learning was concerned (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Pavlenko, 2002; Lantolf, 2006). Students’ self-efficacy beliefs were referred to: “Sometimes we were a bit worried the students shouldn’t cope with the tasks we’d given them. ‘Just be cool’, they always said, ‘We’ll manage’. And so they did”.

Trust is also related to the question of responsibility. This relationship is commented on in the following quotation:

As adults we are more experienced, and we have more extended frames of reference, but we do not have priority in interpreting meaning. We the teachers talked a lot about that... So in that respect they were given a lot of responsibility, the children. (Teacher’s narration)

The teachers concentrated on students’ possibilities instead of their weaknesses. Deficits were rather located to the way children were received at school, encouraging improvements of routines and practices, opposite to blaming deficits on the individuals’ lack of abilities. Children were not seen as deficit

communicators, either as a collective or as individuals. The deficit syndrome, as it was described in the literature (Au & Raphael, 2000; Bernard, 2004; Heat, 1983; Kubota, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002; Shohamy, 2004), was certainly defeated both by teachers and students.

Concluding Remarks

These teachers resisted the deficit syndrome by avoiding colour blindness in finding their ways to enact pedagogy in culturally sensitive classrooms. To promote reading as participation, inclusion protrudes as a vital characteristic of these classrooms with language learners at all different language levels. The applicability of Vygotskian theory on language acquisition is demonstrated, with regard to both social and individual learning processes, highlighting notions like scaffolding and learning in the ZPD, with important implications for teachers' pedagogical choices.

The relations between students and teachers are characterized by the resistance to the deficit syndrome. High expectations, sufficient support, and high demands facilitate high achievement levels. The necessity of a further scrutiny of discourses mediating a monolingual perspective is indicated, since the multilingual perspective communicated by the interviewees protrudes as a potent feature of successful instruction. In particular, the rejection of a strong division between the second and first language learners deserving attention, as such a distinction in itself may support a monolingual perspective, underscoring the otherness of multilingual children.

However, a multitude of books in the classroom is not enough to promote reading. In this study, emergent academic skills were a synergetic outcome dependent on several factors. Teachers' flexibility in approaches to reading acquisition is emphasized by their practice of letting students' individual needs guide the choices of materials and methods. Cross-curricular connections as well as connections across contexts in and out of school contexts created a learning environment where learning could start from the known to be expanded into the unknown.

Although the results of the first study revealed patterns of inequity at a structural level, the addition of qualitative data was needed to shed light upon the teachers' roles as agents of changes. Nor did resistance to a monolingual discourse emerge as an explanatory factor until the frame of reference was expanded to include critical perspectives either. Therefore, mixed methods and trans-disciplinary approaches are needed to promote research adapted to the transformative needs of a postmodern society where novel phenomena link to old phenomena in new ways.

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