

# **A CO-ENROLLMENT PRESCHOOL FOR DEAF AND HEARING CHILDREN: CHALLENGES FOR PARTICIPATION AND LEARNING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports from a study with the aim to acquire knowledge about literacy practices in a co-enrollment preschool with deaf and hearing children aged 2-5 years. The research question raised is developed within a sociocultural framework where literacy is seen as social practice: What terms of interaction may facilitate joint access to literacy events for deaf and hearing children? The study is an observation study. Data is based on field notes, video recordings and interviews with the preschool manager and teachers. The analyses and interpretations are based on transcripts from situated activities and events. The findings indicate that the preschool staff faces challenges in their efforts to facilitate literacy events that may include the deaf children in interaction and communication with their hearing peers. These challenges seem to be related to communication practices and values, especially in activities where both spoken and signed language were in use. Other challenges were related to structural or institutional constraints and conditions. Different kinds of literacy events offered different kinds of literacy learning for the deaf and for the hearing children.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This presentation reports from a Norwegian study on literacy and deafness in preschool settings.<sup>1</sup> In Norway most children with a hearing loss in preschool age are enrolled in preschools with hearing children, often as the only child with a hearing loss. Some deaf children, who live in bigger cities, are enrolled in preschools with groups of both deaf and hearing children, in a co-enrollment setting. In these bimodal, bilingual preschools both sign and spoken language are in use. Almost all children with a severe hearing loss gets cochlear implants at an early age.

The co-enrollment setting referred to in this study was organized as a consequence of a strong involvement by parents of children with cochlear implants in creating educational placements where their children could be together with both deaf and hearing children. The parents wanted their children to get the opportunity to communicate with both deaf and hearing children, with both spoken and signed language in the daily life in preschools.

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## **A SOCIO – CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON LITERACY**

It is well known and documented that deaf children as a group do not perform at the same level as their hearing peers when literacy is concerned (Archbold and Mayer 2012; Hendar 2012; Marschark and Spencer 2011). Deaf children lag behind, compared with hearing children with regard to both comprehension of concepts and vocabulary.

Within a socio-cultural perspective literacy is seen as a part of social practice. Children learn as they take part in a wide range of literacy practices and activities carried out for a range of purposes and occurring in an array of social and cultural contexts (Barton 1994/2007; Razfar and Gutierrez 2003). Research regarding hearing children and literacy suggests a range of social activities and literacy events that may support early literacy learning. In preschools it will be, among many others activities, taking part in events such as joint and shared book reading, multiparty talk and different kinds of play (Purcell- Gates, Jacobsen and Degener 2004; Gjems, 2009). Participation in these activities is considered important for subsequent reading and writing proficiency. Practices that include activities and events that generate vocabulary and expand upon concepts in both everyday language and more academic language are essential for all children (Marulis and Neuman, 2010; Spencer and Marchark 2010; Williams, 2012). We know little about what kind of literacy events deaf children may access and take part in, and what kind of communicative practices they are exposed to.

### **AIM OF THE STUDY**

The overall aim of the study was to contribute to our knowledge of early childhood literacy practices in preschools and in particular knowledge about preschool literacy practices in settings where both deaf and hearing children are enrolled. These settings include both co- enrollment settings as well as ordinary preschools with one deaf child among the hearing children.

Another aim was to identify elements that may secure deaf children's opportunities for participation and interaction in these practices. Knowledge about how deaf children may access significant literacy events where vocabulary and conceptualization are expanded has been a core matter in the study.

### **DESIGN, METHOD AND FINDINGS**

Five preschools were involved in the study, one co-enrollment preschool and four preschools with one child with a hearing loss together with hearing children. In all groups there were about 16 – 20 children aged 2-5 years. Data was constructed by the use of video recordings of a selection of literacy events, mostly from teacher assigned activities. In addition preschool managers and teachers were interviewed, and both field notes and data from observation of activities were included. The analyses and interpretation were based on transcripts from situated activities and events and analyzed within a socio-cultural framework, focusing on categories such as participation, communicative practice and construction of literacy.

Findings from the study indicate that there were different kind of issues that had an impact on deaf children`s possibility to take part in different literacy events. The challenges seemed to be related to communication practices and values. In communication practices conceptions of the different values of sign language versus spoken language are embedded, seemingly placing spoken language as the most valued. Competence among the staff about deaf children`s special needs and structural and institutional constraints and conditions, as for example the implementation and practice of the National framework plan for preschools, also represent challenges and even barriers to joint participation in literacy events by deaf and hearing children (Kristoffersen & Simonsen, 2012, 2013, 2014).

In the next paragraph we will introduce and discuss some of these challenges and we will focus on challenges related to the co-enrollment setting.

### **SAME SETTING; DIFFERENT GOALS FOR DEAF AND HEARING CHILDREN**

In the co-enrollment preschool, all children were subjected to the same curriculum. The curriculum was taught either in spoken or in sign language, or in spoken language with sign support. But the academic goals for the two groups of children differed. For many of the deaf children a goal was to become bilingual with the two verbal languages, Norwegian sign language and Norwegian spoken language. For the hearing children becoming bilingual was no goal. As a consequence the conversations between hearing children and the hearing teachers were mostly in spoken language. The predominance of spoken language in many of the literacy events we observed, both the choice of language used in the events and the pedagogical organization seemed to favor the hearing children. Thus a number of events occurred to be more beneficial for the hearing children than for the deaf children regarding literacy and literacy learning.

### **The staff expertise in sign language**

Some of the staff in the preschool was deaf and fluent sign language users, but as a whole, the staff expertise in Norwegian sign language varied considerably. Competence in sign language was not required when new staff was hired. This fact was mainly because there are few qualified teachers in Norway that are both trained in teaching deaf preschool children and in sign language. Even though there was a huge interest in learning sign language among the staff, and many of the staff rapidly learned many signs, the information that deaf children`s are visually oriented in their communication seemed to be hard to grasp and to apply in everyday activities for the hearing staff.

### **Knowledge among the staff about deaf children`s educational needs**

The staff, as a group, had limited knowledge about deaf children`s educational needs. As mentioned, many deaf children are visually oriented in their communication, and need to see the face of the communication partner, either for lip reading or because of sign language. It turned out that the staff was theoretically aware of this, but when it

came to the daily practice, they often forgot this important aspect, and the deaf children missed part of the communication. In multiparty talk initiated by the children, the hearing children started out their statements in spoken Norwegian, thus often excluding the deaf children from the communication. Frequently it was in these multiparty talk events that new concepts and vocabulary were introduced, as opposed to routine teacher assigned activities and events.

### **The National framework plan for preschools in Norway**

In Norway a new National Framework for preschools was implemented in 2006 and revised in 2011 (Ministry of Education and Research 2006, 2011). Seven different kinds of learning areas were set up, underscoring the vital role of early literacy learning. The seven learning areas are closely connected to the learning areas that children meet when they start school. There has been a discussion among preschool teachers about the influence from schools and their teaching tradition on organizing the daily life in preschools, often named as the “schoolification” of preschools (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). The term “schoolification” of preschools indicates an increasing teacher assigned activities, more formal learning activities and less time for activities initiated by the children and for play. Our study implies that for deaf children teacher assigned literacy events facilitated opportunities for participation, because of the predictable structure and routine of these events. However, in general these events offered less multiparty talk and all children’s possibilities to act as agents in these events were restricted. Little opportunity for exploring and expanding concepts and vocabulary was offered. Having in mind that language, social interaction and literacy are closely related and the fact that children learn by interacting with other children and grownups, the deaf children in this study did not have access to the same significant literacy events as their hearing peers in the co-enrollment setting. These are the events that generate vocabulary and expand upon concepts in both everyday language and more academic language.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Examining the practices children take part in may provide us with some tools in order to improve our understanding of inclusive versus exclusive practices for deaf children in literacy events. Questions that emerge from the findings from our study are multiple:

How do we develop preschools settings where all young children have the opportunity to participate and interact in significant literacy events; events which may promote language and literacy learning?

How should a co-enrollment setting be structured so all children may participate in a shared social, academic and communicative environment?

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