Deficit talk and being ‘at-risk’: How else might we talk about young literacy learners and could this make a difference?

Catarina Schmidt
Jönköping University, Sweden
Annette Woods,
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Presenting Author: Schmidt, Catarina; Woods, Annette

1st Network: LEd – Network on Language and Education
2nd Network: Sociologies of Education

Keywords: Literacy; early childhood; socioeconomic differences, deficit discourses

General description, research questions, objectives and theoretical framework (600 words, now 612)

This paper discusses the implications of teacher talk and classroom interaction on the literacy learning opportunities offered to young children and what it means to be ‘at-risk’ of literacy failure. The logic of current policy contexts across European education systems, and indeed more internationally in countries like Australia, conceptualise literacy as a problem of declining standards that result primarily from poor teaching and ill prepared students. The solutions offered to improve literacy by this logic will always focus on limiting the effect of individual teachers’ pedagogical choices through the introduction of highly defined curriculum options and increased testing and accountability, or on remediating the individual cognitions of children to better prepare them for the next phase of learning. Also, many teachers feel the pressure of assessing student’s literacy learning in a way that the creating of learning spaces for the same target might get lost. Such policy initiatives have the potential to result in our schools and educators losing sight of the importance of classroom interaction, teacher student relationships and teacher common sense assumptions and talk in how children learn literacy as well as the resources and experiences of literacy that they might bring to school. In this paper we aim to fore ground the implications of teachers’ assumptions about children, their families and communities. We consider the impact of deficit talk on children’s equitable access to quality literacy teaching and learning.

The paper draws on data collected within two different studies, and in two very different contexts. The first is a study conducted in an Australian primary school that tracked children and their teachers in the first three years of schooling, to consider what came to count as successful literacy learning and how this was linked to systemic policy, teacher’s understandings and classroom interaction. The second study was carried out in a Swedish elementary school where children were followed in a similar way and length of period. Our cases demonstrate the implications of teachers’ deficit talk about children, and the communities in which they live, on literacy learning and achievement.

Our work is informed by understandings of literacy as social practice in the tradition of the New Literacy Studies (see for example Street, 2003). We conceptualise school failure and school success as social constructions. This is not to suggest that there is not a cognitive element to how well children learn literacy— of course some children learn things easily, while others struggle to understand the same concepts or skills. But we believe there is also a social element to learning literacy and to how children are constructed as literacy learners (see for example Heath, 1983; Heller, 2008). We argue that patterns of access, mediated by location, social class, gender, race and language, cannot be ignored when we consider student literacy outcomes. Pedagogy and learning are socially, culturally, politically and historically constructed and mediated.
Teachers’ common-sense knowledge, assumptions and perceptions work to represent some children as ‘at-risk’, some as ‘failing’ and others as ‘successful’. We bring this conceptual framework to an analysis of the lived experiences of two young children in the early years of schooling. The two case studies demonstrate that literacy success and failure are not straightforwardly a reflection of individual psychology or cognitive ability, but that they are also related to the social and institutional construction of school success and failure.

In this paper, we problematise the above, in order to draw key insights for literacy pedagogy in schools. We ask:

*How are the concepts literacy, success and failure represented within the early years classrooms of these two schools? and*  
*How do these representations position particular children as ‘failing’ to learn literacy?*

**Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used (400 words, we have 390)**

This paper presents two case studies of young literacy learners. The data was collected in two different research projects, but in each case, was the result of sustained fieldwork. Data collected included teacher and student interviews, classroom observations, transcripts of classroom interactions, and work samples produced by the children as they went about learning literacy. The case studies presented analyses the data corpus drawing on techniques of discourse analysis and comparative cross case analysis.

**Case 1: 'Britney'** was in the first year of school in Australia. The school she attended was a mid-sized state run primary school, in the urban sprawl of a capital city in Australia. The school was located in an area of high poverty. Britney was the fourth of seven children, with three older siblings who had already attended the same school. She presented as an articulate, happy, imaginative child in her first year of schooling, but was consistently constructed as failing or being ‘at-risk’ of failing literacy. She is chosen as a representative case here because it is possible to illustrate that her construction as ‘failing’ to learn literacy had little to do with her actual performance on literacy tasks and assessments. Britney achieved at least satisfactory results on all assessment measures used to judge literacy learning during her first two years at school, but this did not seem to disrupt her construction of ‘at-risk’.

**Case 2: ‘Elin’** was in the third year of school in Sweden. The school she attended was a mid-sized state run primary school in a Swedish small town. Elin and her brother were part of a large family and she presented, as Britney, an articulate, happy, imaginative child in her third year of schooling but was consistently constructed as being ‘too much’ in ways of having too many opinions about things. She is chosen as a representative case here because it is possible to illustrate that her construction as being a problematic student had little to do with her actual performance on literacy. Elin achieved very good results on the National tests in the subject Swedish in grade three and managed easily the literacy tasks that were asked of her ahead in grade 4-5. At the same time she had very few chances of dialogues scaffolding her interpretations and comprehension of all texts she met in and out of school.

**Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings (up to 300 words – we have 299 now)**

The case studies presented highlight the complexity of learning literacy in the early years of school across different contexts. We consider the implications of teacher deficit talk on how these young children are constructed as literacy learners, and through the analysis of classroom interaction and student work samples demonstrate how deficit constructions of these children, and ‘those’ like them, can come to matter more than actual achievements when they are embedded deep in the common sense assumptions of the teachers involved.

By analysing cases from different studies conducted in different places – one in Australia and
one in Sweden, we are able to identify some common principles in effective literacy pedagogy for students in relation to socioeconomic factors. The study will demonstrate how deficit talk about children and their communities can impact the success of some children’s learning. The paper aims to interrupt the persistent discourses of deficit and acceptance of lower standards evident for some children and not others. We develop conceptual understandings of the relationships between teacher assumptions, teacher talk and access to quality literacy teaching and learning for all students.

A theorized account of what learning literacy can involve will be uncovered through close attention to the strengths of these young literacy learners and their everyday lived experience of school. This analysis provides insight into the implications of deficit talk, makes visible the everyday practices of teaching and learning literacy in early years classrooms, and uncovers the tenacious resilience of two young literacy learners believed by their teachers to be ‘at-risk’ of failing literacy. The paper is relevant to European classrooms and provides cross national comparisons which are generative and insightful. By providing an evidential base through the two case studies presented, the paper opens spaces for dialogue and comparison across children, classrooms, communities, nations and systems.

References


Intent of Publication

The key intent of this paper is to provide insight into how literacy success and failure are constructed within teacher talk and classroom interaction across two early years classrooms – one in Sweden and one in Australia. The intent is to provide a grounding in the importance of resisting deficit explanations of children and their learning. The paper works to uncover the strengths of young children as literacy learners and to suggest ways to open spaces for this competence to become visible. The paper will be further developed for publication in an international journal of early childhood literacy such as JECL.