Signs of Language
An introduction

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*Signs of Language* is a longitudinal study (2008-2014). The aim of the project is to gain insight into how multilingual children acquire literacy as well as insight into their complex use of the linguistic and semiotic resources available to them. The aim is also to examine how these literacy activities, which take place in the classroom, contribute to setting the framework for how these children create meaning and invest in literacy and their own personal and social identity (Laursen 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011a). It also aims to examine how teachers and students navigate in often ambivalent sites of education, how they deal with linguistic diversity, and how they negotiate the construction of language and literacy within the broader discursive climate.

The study involves five multilingual classes from five schools, which will be followed from year one until year seven. All the schools are located in urban areas and have in common that there is a considerable degree of linguistic diversity among the students and in the surrounding community. By far the majority of the multilingual children, who at the onset of the project were 5 to 6 years old, have lived all their life in Denmark and can be described as being simultaneous bilinguals, as they have been exposed to the two languages they speak from a very early age (McLaughlin 1995); for some of the children from birth, for others between the age of one and three. Some children attend privately organised tutoring in their respective minority language after school or at the weekend, and thus become acquainted with their specific written languages. Some children are home-schooled and/or participate more informally in other literacy events that involve other written languages. In some municipalities mother-tongue teaching is offered, and some of the children attend these lessons. At some schools, the children’s various languages are included in the teaching sessions; however the objective of this is not actually to develop bi-literacy. Access to written languages thus varies significantly from child to child. Similarly, the child’s participation in both formal and informal teaching situations is not necessarily stable with continuity, but often characterised by changes in the child’s conditions and options.

For these children, even though they officially bear the label ‘bilingual student’, this does not necessarily mean that the language of their parents is their dominant language or that they are fluent speakers of this language. Nor does it necessarily mean that they have a special and intimate affiliation toward this language. On the other hand, even though they do not master their parents’ language ‘completely’, or strive to master it completely, this does not mean that this language plays no role in their language practices, nor that it has no place in their linguistic repertoire and does not influence their self-representation and social identity (Daugaard and Laursen 2012, in print).

In each of the five classrooms, six focal children have been picked out, and these focal children will be followed closely throughout the six years of the study. Data sources in this part of the study include classroom observations, informal interactions with the children, semi-structured interviews and collecting artifacts produced by the children as part of the teaching and as part of quasi-experimental activities.

Through intervention studies in linguistically diverse classrooms, *Signs of Language* also aims to investigate the possibilities of restructuring literacy practices in multilingual classrooms by focusing on the children’s
actual language and literacy use as well as understandings in concrete local socio-cultural contexts. Thus, the ambition is not to reveal universal truths, but rather to analyze socially situated opportunities for change.

Theory

A social semiotic perspective

The Signs of language project is based on a social semiotic perspective (Hodge & Kress 1988, Kress 2001). When taking a social semiotic perspective on children’s literacy acquisition, children are fundamentally viewed as social agents who alone, or with others, use, produce, interpret, value, refute, talk about and in other ways interact with the semiotic literacy resources available to them in a given social context.

In a social semiotic understanding of literacy, the sign is the central concept that is to be understood as the product of a realisation process through which meaning is linked to a form (Kress 2007). Literacy is one of several different semiotic modalities of representation, and as such it provides a specific type of sign and semiotic resources. Kress (2001) emphasises that the concept of literacy is etymologically linked to the word letter and therefore also to language. Thus language and the written sign itself constitute the semiotic resources found in literacy. That is, literacy can be understood as “lettered representation” (Kress 1997:116) and as a specific modality that typically coexists with other modalities such as pictures, diagrams, etc.

Contrary to a formal semiotic understanding of the sign, taking a social semiotic perspective implies that the sign is motivated and as such reflects the reader’s or writer’s interests.

Semiotics as the “science of the life of signs in society” is concerned with an account of all meaningful systems in a culture. Its basic unit is the sign, any element in which meaning and form have been brought together through the action of the maker of the sign. In my account of semiotics, signs are motivated conjunctions of meaning and form made by socially situated individuals out of their interest in representation and communication at the moment of the making of the sign. This version of semiotics - social semiotics - assumes that signs are always expressive of the interests of their makers (rather than being conventionally established “counters” of meaning of an arbitrary construction, “exchanged” in communication) (Kress 2001: 405).

Following this line of thought, readers and writers are seen as the makers of signs, and as such they make a number of choices on the basis of the options available to them in the social context. In a teaching context, when dealing with literacy, this entails focusing on how children create meaning by drawing on the information available to them (Kenner et al. 2004) and this entails focusing on how written signs serve as resources that children use differently to pursue different objectives.

Drawing on this understanding of literacy, children’s literacy acquisition is seen as a process through which they create meaning on the basis of the information available to them in the social communities in which they belong ((Kress 1997, 2001, Kenner 2004 a&b). Social semiotics emphasises that this information is not merely absorbed by the children, they in fact actively process and transform the information they
encounter in their surroundings. This transformation takes place because, in addition to the input they are exposed to, the children’s interpretations are also influenced by their own interests and experiences as individuals with their own specific sociocultural background (Kress 1997).

When children are exposed to several written languages during their formative years, their meaning-creation processes include identification of what is important in each of their written languages as well as continuous creation and testing of hypotheses about similarities and differences between the different languages. The relatively sparse research in this area shows that when developing bi-literacy, bilingual children begin to distinguish between different written languages at a very early age, and that they engage in seeking to understand the principles of these different languages (see e.g. Moll & Dworin 2001, Buckwalter & Lo 2002, Kenner et al 2004, Reyes 2006). For example, this is seen in Kenner et al’s (2004) research that includes six case studies of bilingual children aged between four and six with different linguistic backgrounds (Arabic-English, Chinese-English, and Spanish-English). Drawing on a social semiotic understanding, Kenner describes the children’s interpretations of, and hypotheses about, the writing systems prevalent in their surroundings. On the basis of observations of a number of formal and informal interactions about and involving literacy, Kenner’s study show that the children were eager to engage in seeking to understand the principles on which the different written languages rest, and that, even with only relatively little input, they were able to account for the fundamental differences between the written languages.

In Signs of language we have chosen to draw on the social semiotic perspective precisely because of the options this approach offers with regard to understanding children’s acquisition of writing. In social semiotics this acquisition is understood as more than the mental information processing seen in many other cognitive acquisition theories, and as more than socialisation through social participation as is seen in many learning theories based on sociocultural understandings. Due to its focus on the material aspects of literacy in the form of semiotic resources that hold a given meaning potential, the social semiotic point of departure makes it possible, seen from a subject-specific educational perspective, to maintain the children’s interest in the object of learning. Similarly, the social semiotic point of departure also entails a fundamental interest in the relation between the semiotic resources and the transformative use of the resources by the social agents in specific historical and social contexts (Laursen 2011a). Furthermore, the social semiotic framework paves the way for understanding the different roads to literacy that the children travel in their literacy acquisition.

Literacy as a social practice
As acquisition of a written language can be viewed as a process through which children create meaning from the information available to them in their social communities, the programme also focuses on the experiences the children already have with regard to writing, and continue to gain outside of the school setting. Moreover, it also focuses on the prevailing perception and understanding of the use of written language in the children’s social communities. Therefore the project draws on research from the field known as New Literacy Studies that views literacy as a social practice.

When the children first begin school, they bring with them social experience with written language, as they have previously participated in, and still participate in, a number of literacy practices, that is “general
cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives” (Barton & Hamilton 1998:6). Literacy practices are repetitive ways of using written language to which different values, attitudes, feelings and social relations are associated. A classic example of this is the bedtime story, a situation that Heath (1982) has analysed in her study of literacy practices in several social environments in the Carolinas, USA.

In situations such as the bedtime story, literacy is to be understood as a social practice and as something that people do and is thus not a text; nor is it the individual’s mental abilities or a set of skills (Barton 1994, Barton & Hamilton, Street 1984, Holm 2005, 2006).

Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not reside on paper, captured as texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people (Barton & Hamilton 2003:3)

An analysis of literacy practices in a given context rests on identifying the literacy events that take place, the perception of these events, and the value the individual and others ascribe to literacy.

Literacy events are specific, observable events in which written language plays a role. Barton & Hamilton (2003:7) define them as “activities where literacy has a role”, and Heath understands a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (1982: 93).

Literacy events relate to literacy practices that build on historical and sociocultural traditions, and they evolve in line with developments in society while at the same time reflecting individual as well as social objectives and interests (Barton & Hamilton 2003). Typically, the activity revolves around one or more texts and may also include conversation about the texts. These texts may serve different functions in a literacy event, and their use, as well the understanding of literacy, may take on different meaning for the individuals participating in the event. The individual may well participate in a literacy event without being able to read and write a single word. Therefore in the analysis, it is important to focus not only on the text but also on what people do with the text, and what these activities mean to them.

Some literacy events are relatively formal in their structure and have more or less explicit rules for processes and product requirements, while others are more or less governed by individual interests and objectives, or are regulated by social conventions and more informal expectations from friends, peers, etc.

The experiences and understandings of literacy that children gain from the literacy practices they are part of outside the school setting influence the way in which they think about learning how to read and write when at school. The literacy practices they encounter at school also play a significant role in the children’s understanding of literacy, as does how the school takes account of the children’s different levels of experience.
Following the line of thought in New Literacy Studies, a number of studies focus specifically on how the educational life course of a student is shaped by the literacy practices at his or her school, and by the social relationships and identities that are made possible here. For example Bartlett’s research (2007, 2008) that shows how participating in literacy activities reflects the frame of reference in which they take place, what she and Holland et al. (1998) call figured worlds. This concept of **figured worlds** is defined as a “realm of interpretation in which a particular set of characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland et al 1998:52). Figured worlds are thus described as ‘as if’ worlds populated by generic characters (who may also be represented through real, identifiable people) who perform specific actions and are driven by specific motives within the boundaries of a typical storyline or a standard plot. A specific lexicon prevails in these figured worlds, as do specific forms of social categorisation. Figured worlds are created e.g. through use and evocation of **cultural artifacts**, i.e. “objects or symbols inscribed by a collective attribution of meaning in relation to figured worlds” (Bartlett 2007:217). Artifacts can be something tangible, e.g. be a book or similar, or a spoken word. They can also be an ideal or a conceptual label, for example ‘clever student’.

For the children, literacy constitutes a figured world that is inhabited by different players, artifacts, values and perceptions. How the individual child sees him- or herself in this figured world that is constantly changing, and how the child and this figured world are seen by others, undoubtedly affects the child’s investment in literacy as well as the strategies the child adopts in his or her acquisition process. This figured world is neither unambiguous nor static, rather it is world full of cryptic and changeable perceptions. Moreover the relationship between the child’s figured world and the surroundings is also neither stable nor unambiguous, but rather complex and constantly subject to negotiation. Bearing this in mind, one can say that the relationship between what is often referred to as the child’s or the children’s background and a homogeneous classroom culture is also not clear cut, and as such cannot be described using a so-called match-mismatch theory. Match-mismatch theories are theories that are based on there either **being or not being** a match between the practices and values prevalent in the home and at school, and that this match or lack hereof determines whether the child succeeds at school. Although there is undoubtedly a connection between the practices and values in the home, at school, and the child’s participation possibilities in the classroom, this connection is more complex and fluid than is assumed within the framework of match-mismatch thinking. As regards practices and values outside the school, these are seldom as clear-cut as is assumed in match-mismatch theories. This is because the family often represents several different practices and values, and because the child encounters other practices and values than those found in his or her family. Finally, the match-mismatch understanding of the child’s background disregards individual agency and the child’s own interpretations of the practices and values he or she encounters. As for the child’s participation possibilities in the classroom, these are also not as predictable as indicated in match-mismatch theory. The classroom also represents several practices and values, and these are subject to constant negotiation. Thus neither the ‘child’s background’, the classroom nor the relationship between the two should be seen as predictable and unambiguous phenomena, however this does not mean that there is no relationship, nor that different values or modes of practice do not play a role. Furthermore, it does not mean that some children do not bring with them more resources or symbolic capital, nor that patterns and limitations for participation in the classroom cannot be identified, even though these are constantly being negotiated.
Methodology

According to Willett (1995) the sociocultural ecology, i.e. the immediate environment, which in this case is made up of the school and the classroom, creates the micro-interactions that serve as a framework for the child’s spoken and written language acquisition. Drawing on an understanding of language and written language learning as taking place through contextually situated interactive practices, the collection of data in *Signs of language* not only takes into account the individual’s language and literacy at a given time, but also draws on an interest in the framework and the space the social context sets for language and literacy development.

As mentioned in the above, children’s written language acquisition is understood as a process through which they create meaning from the information available to them in their social communities (Laursen, 2008; 2009a & b). This means that the project focuses on the interplay between the children’s meaning creation that is understood as a dynamic and non-static phenomenon on the one hand and on other hand as micro-interactions and the accessibility of, or access to, language and literacy resources in the classroom (figure 1).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1:** The research design

Drawing on an understanding of language and written language learning as taking place through contextually situated interactive processes, the data collection in *Signs of language* not only takes into account the individual’s language and literacy at a given time, but also draws on an interest in the boundaries and the space the social context sets for language and literacy development.

As the project involves research into education as well as development and it includes a social-change perspective, we focus on those language and literacy practices that constitute the framework for the children’s creation of meaning. Our focus is thus the children’s creation of meaning in relation to these practices, rather than diagnosing mental abilities and skills and categorising the children, in that these
language and literacy practices create the framework for the children’s learning processes. This is why changing these practices may lead to changes in the children’s learning processes.

Thus the methodological design of the project can be characterised as follows:

(1) Data is not only collected with a view to identifying how the individual creates meaning at a given time, but also with a view to identifying how the social surroundings set the boundaries and create space for this creation of meaning. Focus is not exclusively on the individual, but on the individual in its interpersonal and sociocultural contexts (see also Willett 1995), which is why the collection of data is taking place in, and involves, the local context.

(2) Therefore, when collecting data, we draw on several data sources and have taken a flexible approach, thus enabling inclusion of data from areas that reveal themselves to be productive for the project (see also Miller 2004; Nelson et al., 1992).

(3) Data collection also rests on an emic perspective in order to ensure visibility of the participants’ voices and subjectivity. This emic perspective is applied to both the children and teachers who participate in the project, and is also applied to other central players, e.g. the children’s parents and school management, and finally to the researchers themselves (see also Miller, 1997; 2004; Denos et al., 2009).

(4) Data collection includes intervention in the teaching practice and thus includes a social change perspective. This is due to a wish to explore the scope for development and to create a foundation for a discussion of challenges (see also Denos et al., 2009).
The primary data in the project consist of data on individuals collected in relation to the selected focal children, and in some cases in relation to all children in the class group, as well as classroom data. Furthermore, data that is related to the school as an organisation have also been collected. Finally, the participants’ own reflections are included as key data (figure 2).

### Figure 2: Data material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom data</th>
<th>Data on individuals</th>
<th>School data</th>
<th>Participant data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observations, video footage and transcriptions</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Student texts</td>
<td>Participant reflections - ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom interventions, observations, video footage and transcriptions</td>
<td>Quasi-experimental activities</td>
<td>Other language data</td>
<td>Other documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching materials, etc.</td>
<td>Classroom observations - ongoing</td>
<td>Classroom observations - ongoing</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Project structure

*Signs of language* is the result of a collaboration between VIA University College, University College Nordjylland, University College Lillebaelt, University College Copenhagen (UCC), Department of Education (DPU) at Aarhus University, and the municipalities of Aarhus, Aalborg, Vejle, Odense and Copenhagen. The project is being financed by the municipalities and university colleges mentioned above as well as by DPU, the Danish Ministry of Education and the Danish Ministry of Integration (now the Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration). A list of the project participants can be found in Annex 1.

*Signs of language* is thus the result of a research and development collaboration (see e.g. Denos et al., 2009; Blackledge & Creese, 2010 on collaborative research). This collaboration includes researchers, research students, teacher training educators, and teachers, who all bring with them a different perspective and are interested in increasing knowledge about classroom practices and how to create the best possible learning environment for the heterogeneous group of students that makes up the category ‘bilingual students’.
The project is being conducted at five different locations in Denmark that offer different contexts for our research and development in that there are variations in e.g. the demographics of the local area, the municipal school policy, organisation of schools, student composition in the classroom and the backgrounds of the participating teachers and research assistants. This variation is an unavoidable element of the project and it varies from day to day. The varying conditions of the project force us to include the contextual conditions. This does not necessarily make the process easier, however it does enable us to retain the complexity of the area of practice with which we are dealing, and thereby avoid presenting unequivocal and universal answers to complex and contextually embedded questions. What is possible under certain specific conditions is not necessarily directly transferable to another context, but must be understood contextually. In the project, the various and fluid contexts constitute a central framework for research and development, just as the participants’ different backgrounds and perspectives that are met, negotiated, fragmented and developed throughout the process create the framework for reflections on the possibilities for change in the given context.

One of the objectives of the project is for the knowledge acquired to be used and further developed in other contexts. Therefore one can say that the project is rooted in a knowledge cycle as illustrated in figure 3 below. The project design enables dissemination of the knowledge acquired to teacher training programmes as well as early childhood educator training programmes (basic training programme as well as further training). This allows the project to further develop the research foundation of the training programmes offered at the university colleges on the basis of the actual conditions in the local community. This is achieved by ensuring that the research assistants involved in the project who are employed at the local university college include the new knowledge in their work with students at their college, and by including the students in observations at the school, etc. By taking this approach, the project is generating good knowledge of the local conditions and research experience. Knowledge sharing will also take place at the university colleges via local knowledge centres, study groups and lectures. Moreover, the project has been designed so that municipal consultants are also included in the programme, thus enabling them to include and disseminate project results throughout the entire municipality. Involvement in the project also allows them to influence developments at national level, through for example collaboration with the representatives in the steering committee from the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration and the Danish Ministry of Education. Finally, experience gained in the project can also contribute to developing research into teacher education, in part through the head of research’s affiliation with the research community, and in part through the external researchers linked to the programme, currently Professor Anne Pitkänen-Huhta, University of Jyväskylä, Finland; Associate Professor Lars Holm, Department of Education (DPU), Aarhus University; and Assistant Professor Mette Bucharest, University of Copenhagen.
Subject-specific educational action research
As a central aspect of the project, two annual interventions are conducted in each of the participating class groups. These interventions are planned as action research. In this context, action research refers to a scientific methodology which aims at generating general knowledge and at finding solutions to practical problems. Action research thus holds both an overall change perspective and a research perspective that leave their mark on the research design and research process. On the one hand, action research distinguishes itself from classroom research in that the researcher intervenes in the pedagogical processes in the classroom and conducts a close analysis of the effects of this intervention. On the other hand, this research distinguishes itself from action learning, practitioner research or teacher research (see e.g. Lank Shear & Knobel, 2004), in that it is conducted by researchers in collaboration with representatives from pedagogical practice and thus subject to the same academic quality criteria as other research.

The double objective
Overall, action research is characterised by its double objective (or its double burden as Argyris and Schön (1989) call it): namely to develop a practice and to generate new knowledge about precisely this practice. How to achieve this double objective varies depending on the type of action research in question as well as the values and the theoretical anchoring of this double objective (seen in a Danish pedagogical perspective, e.g. Laursen et al., 2002, Bayer et al. 2004; Buchardt & Fabrin, 2009).
**Cyclic processes**

Another fundamental characteristic that can be traced back to Kurt Lewin, who is often described as the founding father of action research, is that the process is designed as a series of cycles that shift between action phases and reflection phases (Lewin 1946) (figure 4). The figure below shows the cycles used in *Signs of language*.

![Diagram of action research cycle]

Each cycle consists of three phases: a planning phase, an implementation phase, and an analysis phase. One cycle leads on to the next in that the experience gained in the first cycle form the basis for the next cycle. Planning typically begins with identification of a specific issue that is anchored in the local community, and thus leads to a specific academic focus. The next step is further exploration of the issue and the selected academic focus, leading on to a plan for practical execution. The plan is implemented and analysed on the basis of an analysis of collected data. The next cycle builds on the results of this analysis. Thus, in this case, action research is characterised by constantly shifting between the reflection phase and the practice phase, which are both equally important for the process.
Collaboration and division of responsibilities

A third characteristic of action research is that it is based on collaboration between teaching practitioners and an external researcher. How this collaboration takes place in practice varies from project to project. For example Bayer et al. (2004) distinguish between four different types of collaboration between teachers and the external researcher, focusing in particular on the division of responsibilities with regard to the planning of actions.

a) Joint research into practices.
   This type of collaboration is characterised by being based on the ideal that all processes are joint processes.

b) The researcher who observes - the teacher who acts.
   In this type of collaboration, the teacher sets the agenda for what is to happen in practice, whereas the external researcher serves as a dialogue partner and observer.

c) The researcher as a consultant – the reflective practitioner.
   Characteristic of this type of collaboration is that here the researcher sets the agenda in that he or she proposes how to approach the actions to be taken.

d) The researcher as an advisor – the teacher as a researcher.
   Here the researcher acts as an advisor, while the teachers themselves conduct research into their own practices.

In *Signs of language*, collaboration is characterised by the fact that local actions at the given school are designed, implemented and analysed collaboratively by the research assistant and teachers involved. There is a division of responsibilities in that the teachers bear overall responsibility for planning the teaching, whereas the research assistant bears overall responsibility for the analysis. With regard to the practical division of responsibilities, experience has shown that this division is not clear-cut and therefore it can prove difficult to categorise responsibilities. In parallel with the ongoing negotiation about the content of change, the process of change and the expected effects of change, the given groups also negotiate relationships and the division of responsibilities between them. Thus how responsibilities are divided varies from group to group, just as this division also changes character depending on the cyclic process as well as the phase in the cycle.

Furthermore, experience gained in the individual groups is included in large scale interdisciplinary knowledge production. One can say that *Signs of language* holds three knowledge-creating spaces, as illustrated in figure 5 below. The red circles represent the five school groups that together plan, carry out and analyse the local interventions. The school groups consist of the teachers involved and the local research assistant. The green circle represents the research group responsible for the overall framework for the interventions and for analysing the experience gained in all of the school groups. The research group consists of five research assistants and the head of the research project. This group also includes external researchers who are brought in when their specialist knowledge is needed. Finally, two seminars are held every year (represented by the blue circle). All parties with a fixed role in the project participate in these seminars. At the seminars the school and research groups get together to discuss their experience from, and analyses of, the interventions. The consultants from the local authorities also participate in one of the
two annual seminars so they can keep abreast with the process and incorporate the preliminary experience and analyses in municipal efforts.

Figure 5: Knowledge-generating spaces

This structure enables the different stakeholders and stakeholder perspectives to meet under various conditions; not in order to draw a general picture of an unambiguous reality, but rather in order to seek a nuanced understanding of the teaching practices in play and the possibilities for change embedded in these practices as well as their limitations.

**Subject-specific educational research**

The action research in *Signs of language* is based in subject-specific education in that it aims at developing and gaining insight into a given academic subject field in the teaching practices prevalent.

In this context, we use the term subject-specific education to refer to *institutionally embedded pedagogical interactions that are designed to teach a specific academic content*. Research questions posed under the heading ‘subject-specific educational research’ include: What characterises the interaction about, with and around the academic subject field? How can this interaction be understood in the context of the given learning intention? How do the stakeholders involved understand and interpret the learning intention, and how is the academic subject field understood and interpreted? What characterises the design of the teaching interactions? What education-policy, scientific and other discourses does this design draw on, and how are they expressed in the design itself and in the interaction? What institutional frameworks are present and how do the interactions relate to these?
The fact that subject-specific education as a concept relates to the intention of teaching does not mean that research into subject-specific education necessarily sees the individual as a rational being that acts intentionally. Rather it recognises that the individual’s actions often stem from a perception of the individual as an intentional being. The very essence of teaching is the intention to teach someone something. That far from everything that takes place in a specific teaching situation is intentional is of course also a condition that research into subject-specific education must take into consideration, if this research is to lead to a greater understanding of the teaching processes that actually take place.

Action research into subject-specific education thus includes intervening in the practices in the classroom. This is done on the basis of an explicit intention to create a framework in which the students can learn about a specific subject. As such, this intervention both changes the teaching interactions in the classroom and observes what effect these changes have with regard to increasing the understanding of the potential scope for change.

In *Signs of language* the specific subject field is linked to literacy and bilingualism, as well as to the intention to change the teaching practices that prevail in the learning conditions for bilingual students. One of the objectives of the project is to increase knowledge about which conditions contribute to creating opportunities and limitations for learning. Moreover, from a democratic perspective, the project aims at exploring possibilities for change that are locally situated yet can generate a more general insight that can be taken from the local context and expanded to aid development of teaching practices in other local contexts.

**Change and research**

There is an almost inherent and relatively inevitable dilemma in all action research, namely that of the double objective and the simultaneous change and research perspective. When a project aims at developing a practice while at the same time generating new knowledge about this practice, participants often find themselves in situations that they perceive as conflictual. Action research is about disregarding a business-as-usual approach (Toohey & Waterstone, 2004), or, in the words of Burchardt and Fabrin, creating “an extraordinary space in which things can be done differently from normal; to learn more about how and which practices can be changed,” (2009:30). In the short term this may mean that not all actions are successful in the sense that they proceed as planned from a teaching perspective. This may leave the participants feeling frustrated precisely because the action was fuelled by a desire to create change for ‘the better’. In this situation it may prove difficult to maintain a more long-term change and research perspective as well as the fundamental idea in action research, namely that development of practices happens through ongoing reflection about and analysis of practices, and that this reflection is generated by those situations in which things take a course different to that expected. It is also often these situations that lead to questions that may not have been asked before and that are necessary if the potential for change is to be activated.

The dilemma described above may be amplified by an inherent expectation of regular dissemination of results (see above about the knowledge cycle). The sluggishness in the research and change perspective may clash with the expectation of quick and final results. However, this need not be the case as long as the procedural perspective is maintained and made explicit. But it is not necessarily easy to balance the ideal
for change, research and dissemination and remain patient in the process. In *Signs of language* this is a theme we repeatedly return to in the various knowledge-creating spaces, and that we see as an integrated part of the knowledge-creation process.

**Analytical perspectives**

*Analytical perspectives based on data on individuals*

In each classroom we have identified six focal children whom we follow more closely than the other children in the class. So as to gain insight into the meaning-creating processes involved in the children’s literacy acquisition, we have designed a number of activities that in each their own way make room for the children’s use of, and reflections about, language and writing (see Annex 2).

When processing the data, several different analytical approaches are taken, depending on the focus of the analysis in question. Either an individual data source can be analysed, asking the question, what kind of insights can the various data sources offer? Or the individual child can be analysed across the data sources. Finally, data processing can be ruled by identification of consistent themes that in turn can serve as the foundation for a thematic analysis across children and data sources.

*Analytical perspectives based on classroom data*

The action research processes (see Annex 3 for an overview) are recorded and analysed using several different foci. We base our analysis of these processes on identification of literacy events. These literacy events are selected and analysed on the basis of several different thematic foci. In status report 2 (Laursen 2009), the analysis of the intervention focuses on identifying various types of literacy events that in different ways create a space for the children’s interaction with, about and around written language in interplay with other forms of representation. The analysis also takes into consideration the children’s bilingualism in this interaction about and around these texts.

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**Figure 6**: The literacy event - analytical focus

- possibly in combination with other modes of representation
- and possibly involving languages other than Danish
In status report 3 (Laursen 2010), the literacy events in the classroom were analysed with a view to identifying how these events create a framework for participation and learning. By analysing the experience gained from the different schools, we identified several dilemmas that served to delimit the possibilities and limitations of the change perspective in classroom practices. This dilemma analysis was central in the research assistants’ midway report, status report 4 (Laursen 2011), in which there was particular emphasis on identifying and discussing potentials in relation to including the needs of bilingual children for reading and writing lessons in primary school. In status report 5 (Laursen 2012), on the basis of the above reflections, we have attempted to boil down the experiences gained from the project into a teacher-education reflection model. Our ambition is to identify a number of concepts that are useful when working with children, who have different language skills and literacy experiences in several languages, in primary school and in the transition to lower secondary school (see Annex 4).
Annex 1

Participants in the programme - August 2012

Head of research
Helle Pia Laursen, Department of Education (DPU), AU

External researchers: Lars Holm, associate professor Aarhus University; Mette Buchardt, assistant professor, Copenhagen University; Anne Pitkänen-Huhta, professor, Jyväskylä University

Research assistant
Line Moeller Daugaard, associate professor VIA UC

Classroom 1
Soendervangskolen Aarhus

Research assistant
Lone Wulff, associate professor UCC

Classroom 2
Blaagaard Skole København

Research assistant
Birgit Orluf, associate professor UCL

Classroom 3
Abildgaardsskolen Odense

Research assistant
Winnie Oestergaard, associate professor UCN

Classroom 4
Herningvej skole Aalborg

Research assistant
Uffe Ladegaard, associate professor UCL

Classroom 5
Noerremarksskolen Vejle

External researchers:
Lars Holm, associate professor Aarhus University; Mette Buchardt, assistant professor, Copenhagen University; Anne Pitkänen-Huhta, professor, Jyväskylä University
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Municipal contact person</th>
<th>Specialist reading teacher</th>
<th>Contact person at school</th>
<th>Participants 2010/2011</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copenhagen</td>
<td>Blaagaard skole</td>
<td>Karen Maass</td>
<td>Karen Maass</td>
<td>Maj Engelbrecht, teacher; Mette Johannesen, teacher; Lærke Lundby Hansen, teacher</td>
<td>Lone Wulff, associate professor, UCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odense</td>
<td>Abildgaardsskolen</td>
<td>Kurt Buchgraitz</td>
<td>Hanne Hermandsen</td>
<td>Mona Hassan, teacher; Anne Kühn, teacher; Tina Teilmann, specialist reading teacher</td>
<td>Birgit Orluf, associate professor, UCL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vejle</td>
<td>Noerre-marke-skolen</td>
<td>Lene Vagtholm</td>
<td>Olga Snor</td>
<td>Mette Schytz, DSL teacher; Karina Hvid, teacher; Christina Kristensen, teacher</td>
<td>Uffe Ladegård, associate professor, UCL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aalborg</td>
<td>Herningvej Skole</td>
<td>Helle Tobiassen, Faten El-Ibari, Indira Karamehmedovic</td>
<td>René Arnold Knudsen, school principal</td>
<td>Jeanette Nielsen, teacher; Khiloud Khalil, teacher; Marianne Dausel, DSL teacher</td>
<td>Winnie Oestergaard, associate professor, UCN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aarhus</td>
<td>Soender-vang-skolen</td>
<td>Karsten Baltzer-sen</td>
<td>Marianne Holst Nielsen</td>
<td>Annette Jensen, child and youth educator; Else M. Moeller-Hansen, teacher; Maria Fenger, teacher; Tina Nickelsen, specialist reading teacher</td>
<td>Line Moeller Daugaard, associate professor, VIAUC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Members of the steering committee for Signs of language:

- Soeren Hegnby, team leader, City of Copenhagen (Chairman)
- Lise Tingleff, head of research, University College Copenhagen
- Hans Joergen Staugaard, Head of Knowledge Center, University College Nordjylland
- Faten El-Ibari, consultant, the Municipality of Aalborg
- Ulla Risbjerg Thomesen, director of education, University College Lillebaelt
- Kurt Buchgraitz, consultant, Odense Municipality
- Lene Vagtholm, consultant, the Municipality of Vejle
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- Karsten Baltzersen, consultant, the Municipality of Aarhus
- Hanne Loengreen, head of department, Department of Education, Aarhus University (DPU).
- Marian Lyng Moeller, head of section, Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration
- Tina Fehrmann, special adviser, Danish Ministry of Education
• Helle Pia Laursen, head of research, Department of Education (DPU) Aarhus University & University College Copenhagen.

External researchers
• Mette Buchardt, assistant professor, University of Copenhagen
• Lars Holm, associate professor, Aarhus University (DPU)
• Anne Pitkänen-Huhta, professor, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Research assistant
• Liv Fabrin
## Annex 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection activities</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Collection period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One day in a year-1, year-2 and year-3 class group</td>
<td>Through observation of one full school day to examine the classroom as a written language environment and identify the literacy events that take place that day.</td>
<td>Autumn 2008, 2009, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write whatever you want</td>
<td>To gain insight into how the children in year 1 participating in the project use the representational resources available to them and how they understand written language.</td>
<td>Autumn 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting cards</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s budding understanding of writing and other signs.</td>
<td>Autumn 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with children: experiences with reading and writing</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s perceptions of (bi)literacy as these are expressed in their conversations with the research assistant, and into the children’s (bi)literacy practices as well as the (bi)literacy practices in their homes, as perceived by the children.</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell a long story</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s use of (Danish) spoken language in their interaction with another child.</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of letters</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s productive and receptive knowledge of letters after having completed the 1st year of primary school.</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading aloud</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s reading and reading strategies (in Danish) when reading aloud from the book “Jeg vil have fisk” (I want some fish) for the research assistant or specialist reading teacher.</td>
<td>Autumn 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer teaching</td>
<td>To gain insight into how children express themselves about written language when asked to teach classmates (or other children) and the research assistant in the written language of their mother tongue (or another written language that is used in their everyday lives), and into how they talk about this situation.</td>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write an email</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s written language and writing strategies (in Danish) on the basis of them writing an email to a fictive character.</td>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview with the children: my world of languages</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s linguistic practices and what they perceive as important in these practices, as expressed in their conversations with other children or the research assistant.</td>
<td>Autumn 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write a story</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s writing and writing strategies (in Danish) as is demonstrated in their story about Julie Nord’s picture No. 5 Domestic scene, 2009.</td>
<td>Spring 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts in many languages</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s knowledge about and reflections on meaning-creating strategies in relation to several types of text in different languages as expressed in the children’s conversations with the research assistant and other children.</td>
<td>Autumn 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life under Antarctic</td>
<td>To gain insight into the children’s reading processes and reading strategies when reading aloud from a non-fictional text with a research assistant and a classmate.</td>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Annex 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Aarhus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Heading for course/activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1 | • Working with the written language with ‘Fidus’  
   • Words in several languages - exploring written language across languages |
| 2 | • Reading spaces and reading experiences  
   • Reading experiences in several languages |
| 3 | • Idioms in Danish and other languages  
   • The class group 2A as meteorologists |
| 4 | • To create meaning in the encounter with art  
   • Play up and write down |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Vejle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Heading for course/activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1 | • Fairy tales from all over the world  
   • Geometry in several languages |
| 2 | • The world of letters and letters of the world  
   • Giving shape to sense |
| 3 | • The class lexicon  
   • The world of jokes |
| 4 | • Reading strategies in picture novels  
   • Homonyms and false fiends |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Copenhagen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Heading for course/activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1 | • Playing with writing  
   • Making magic with elephants |
| 2 | • Writing strategies  
   • Linguistic discovery |
| 3 | • Language ethnography in Noerrebro, Copenhagen  
   • Exploring the language of natural science |
| 4 | • Exploring cohesion  
   • The language of rap music |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Odense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>Heading for course/activities</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1            | • On the road to writing - writing on the road  
|              | • Many kinds of animals |
| 2            | • The world in the classroom - the classroom in the world  
|              | • My favourite food |
| 3            | • Me and my body  
|              | • Fables |
| 4            | • What shall we play? Preparing instructions for a game including the multilingual experiences of bilingual children.  
|              | • Reading maps and making directions; from colloquial language to jargon-specific language |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Aalborg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>Heading for course/activities</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1            | • Exploring the written language in the kitchen  
|              | • Money notes and playing shop |
| 2            | • A world of alphabets and One letter, one shape  
|              | • Alfons AAbberg - in Danish and in Arabic |
| 3            | • Reading comic books in several languages  
|              | • What do you do when you want to understand what you’re reading? |
| 4            | • Describing wings and birds  
|              | • Describing a part of the world |
Annex 4

Teaching literacy in a interlanguage-stretching perspective

- How can teaching be designed to allow children to stretch their language?

Teaching literacy in a crosslinguistic perspective

- How can teaching encourage children to explore writing by drawing on their overall knowledge of language(s)?

Teaching literacy in a social identity perspective

- How can teaching be designed to allow space for children’s linguistic identity processes?
References


https://didak.ucc.dk/public/dokumenter/UFEV/DIDAK/Statusrapport%20oktober%202009.pdf


