

Promoting the Joy of Learning Multiliteracies from Early Years Onwards: An Educational Reform Initiative in Finland

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Abstract

Finland has recently introduced multiliteracy as a foundational competency in its new national core curricula for the education of children up to the age of 16. This paper discusses the impetus and rationale for the introduction of multiliteracies in Finnish curriculum reform and defines what counts as multiliteracy in the Finnish context. The discussion links to the international research literature on multiliteracies and notes some of the challenges in defining and promoting multiliteracies in education. The final part of the paper introduces The Joy of Learning Multiliteracies (MOI), an ongoing national research and development programme launched by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and researchers and teacher trainers. The programme responds to the need to conceptualise and promote young children's (0–8 years) engagement with multiliteracies in formal education and beyond through research and co-design of learning environments and pedagogies to enhance multiliteracies among culturally and linguistically diverse children, both in educational and cultural institutional settings and in homes and communities.

Introduction

Finland has recently introduced *multiliteracy* as a new foundational competency to be promoted from early childhood onwards. The new curricula documents for early childhood (0–5-year-olds), pre-primary (6-year-olds) and basic education (7–16-year-olds) define multiliteracy as 'a set of skills and knowledge for making sense and producing meanings via different modes and media for diverse purposes and audiences in diverse communication settings' (OPH, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

The Finnish curricula are informed by a broad understanding of multiliteracy, where

literacy relates to any symbol that communicates meaning, referring not only to print-based reading and writing of texts but also to pictures, sounds, videos, graphics and combinations of these. In other words, multiliteracies encompass print-based literacy, visual literacy, media literacy and digital literacy, as well as disciplinary literacies such as science and mathematics. Multiliteracy is also seen to interact with other '21st century competencies' that include critical thinking and learning to learn, social interaction and expression, working life and entrepreneurship, as well as social participation and influence (OPH, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

While the concept of multiliteracy advocated by the Finnish core curricula resonates with international research (The New London Group, 2012; Kalantzis et al., 2016; Serafini and Gee, 2017), there are some qualitative differences or differing emphases in defining multiliteracy. Whereas the Finnish use of the term attempts to capture the diversity of literacy skills needed in contemporary society, the international research literature typically understands multiliteracy not as a 'skill set' that learners develop but rather as a social practice or pedagogical approach that responds to the requirements of multimodal communication, diversity and social change (Mertala, 2017).

Barriers to promoting multiliteracies in young children

While the broad case for multiliteracies is established among education scholars well beyond Finland (Mills, 2015), it has nevertheless proved difficult to achieve clarity and approval for the concept among education professionals and policy makers. In fact, multiliteracy has not informed curriculum reform in many countries other than Finland. Additionally, an emphasis on acquisition and testing of de-contextualised skills in formal education (such as decoding and phonics in the early years) has discouraged or even prevented teachers in many parts of the world from purposefully promoting multiliteracies in formal education (Sahlberg, 2011). Although most societies expect their education systems to prepare young people for the future, both the concept and practice of multiliteracies in education remain relatively underdeveloped and surprisingly restricted.

In Finland, too, teachers are currently ill-prepared to conceptualize and consciously promote multiliteracies in education or, consequently, to implement the new curricula requirements. Although the inclusion of multiliteracy in curriculum texts is an important and necessary step, this is not in itself sufficient. Ensuring that multiliteracies become an integral part of educational practice from early years onwards will require professional development coupled with research and development of pedagogy and learning environments.

In Finland, varying definitions and approaches to multiliteracy make it hard to grasp the meaning of multiliteracy and to systematically and consciously promote multiliteracies in education. To put it bluntly, multiliteracy is approached in some texts as little more than an

add-on—a motivating factor to tackle the increasing disinterest in traditional print literacy among children and young people. For instance, by introducing new digital technologies and media, it is hoped to promote interest and engagement in more traditional literacy, and in school learning in general, by linking children's informal digital literacies to formal schooling (Kumpulainen et al., 2017). In other documents (e.g. <http://monilukutaito.fi>), multiliteracy is reduced to media education. In similar vein, Finnish education policy documents (including the curricula) define multiliteracy as a twenty-first century competence to be promoted throughout the curricula and across various disciplines, including science, mathematics and the arts (OPH, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). On this broader definition, multiliteracy takes more account of agency, identity and citizenship in the twenty-first century. Overall, it is reasonable to conclude that multiliteracy remains a slippery concept that is hard to define—and, therefore, to systematically promote in educational practice.

Children's social ecologies as developmental contexts for multiliteracies

Research on children's opportunities to engage with and learn about multiliteracies in their social ecologies has produced some worrying findings. Social ecologies can be defined as a set of interacting sites in the lives of children and young people that mediate engagement, learning and identity building (Barron, 2006). For instance, in a recent international review of digital literacies, Kumpulainen and Gillen (2017) found that children have varying degrees of opportunity to engage with and learn from digital technologies and media in their homes, depending on how parents frame media use and family interactions with and around technology and media. These conclusions align with the earlier findings of Liebeskind et al. (2014) that parent-child interactions are positively associated with children's language production. In addition to parental mediation styles, there is evidence of an association between children's engagement with multiliteracies and parents' educational, cultural and socioeconomic background and their digital skills and attitudes (e.g. Livingstone et al., 2015). Overall, the evidence points to the importance of the home context and parents' mediation practices for children's engagement with multiliteracies prior to formal schooling (Kumpulainen and Gillen, 2017).

Existing research also suggests that teachers have little awareness of children's literacies in the home, including their use of digital technologies and media (Aubrey and Dahl, 2014). Similarly, parents across Europe report knowing little about their children's digital literacies in the nursery or kindergarten or at school (Livingstone et al., 2015). Parents would welcome stronger and more collaborative relationships with early years education through information sharing and exchange of good practice, indicating a disconnect between children's in- and out-of-school literacy practices and learning opportunities (see also Parry, 2014). There is also

evidence that teachers' competencies vary greatly in harnessing digital literacies for pedagogical purposes (e.g. Aubrey and Dahl 2014; Fenty and Anderson, 2014), and that provision of digitally-enhanced learning opportunities for children in formal educational settings remains uneven (Palaiologou, 2016; Koivula and Mustola, 2017).

In sum, recent evidence about children's everyday lives inside and outside formal education poses at least two key challenges for policy and educational practice. Because multiliteracy is rooted in the communicative practices of children's families and communities, its promotion in formal education demands a multicultural, anti-elitist approach that cherishes and draws upon children's cultural and linguistic diversity (see also Scott, 2016), based on collaboration and knowledge exchange across home, community and institutional settings. At the same time, there is a need to acknowledge that literacy is a profoundly gendered practice (Luke and Gore, 1992) and to devote conscious attention to how it recalibrates power—that is, to the relationship between multiliteracies and exclusion and alienation.

Promoting every child's multiliteracies from the outset

In response to the evidence of children's unequal opportunities to engage with and learn about multiliteracies in their social ecologies and acknowledging the importance of multiliteracies in children's current and future lives—work, civic and personal—the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and researchers and teacher educators from the University of Helsinki launched the MOI research and development programme in early 2017 to promote multiliteracies among children up to 8 years of age (www.monilukutaito.com). MOI targets teachers and educational professionals working in early years education, pre-school and initial primary education (years 1 and 2 of compulsory schooling), as well as those working in the library and cultural sectors. MOI integrates educational policy, research and practice to develop and promote learning environments and pedagogies that shift attitudes towards multiliteracies and enhance young children's multiliteracies. MOI also seeks to reinforce professional expertise by helping teachers to make informed judgments about the development of children's multiliteracies.

A distinct and somewhat novel feature of MOI is the attempt to promote multiliterate practices across and between educational and cultural sites, ranging from early years centres, schools, libraries and museums to more informal activities, embracing both the more conventional print, film and media literacies and new digital modes of communication and expression across the curriculum. This pluralist attitude addresses the need for education policy and practice to prepare children for all forms of creative and critical expression and understanding in contemporary society's rich and diverse practices of social communication (Serafini and Gee, 2017). The joy and motivation to learn multiliteracies is also central to

Finnish educational efforts (OPH, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

The new Finnish core curricula for early years and pre-primary education provide fertile ground for this holistic and hybrid approach. Integrative in nature, the curricula are organized into five entities and areas of transversal competence, as shown in Figure 1 below. However, in addition to the curricula, educational models and practices must support the actual implementation of a pedagogy of multiliteracies.



Figure 1

The MOI definition of multiliteracy

The theoretical grounding of the MOI programme is informed by the work of the New London Group on multiliteracies (e.g. The New London Group, 2012; Kalantzis et al., 2016; Serafini and Gee, 2017) as well as by sociocultural perspectives on learning and development (e.g. Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1987). Multiliteracy is understood as a social practice entailing the requisite skills and knowledge for personal and public participation in an increasingly diverse world throughout the life course.

Multiliteracy is seen to enable both children and adults to interpret and influence the world around them while recognizing cultural diversity and building their own identities as unique individuals and active members of various communities. MOI therefore approaches multiliteracy at the level of epistemology (i.e. what we know and do), ontology (i.e. who we are) and ideology (i.e. what we value). On this view, multiliteracy is about being able to approach the world with an open and curious attitude and a healthily critical mindset, informed by an understanding and appreciation of diversity and polyphony. Multiliteracy enables us to evaluate information, arguments and opinions and, if necessary, to challenge them. It also means contemplating ethical and aesthetic questions and making a difference. In short, MOI views

multiliteracy as a gateway to humanity, social inclusion, lifelong learning, participation and influence.

Drawing on Green's 3D (1988) model, MOI holds that learning multiliteracies entails at least three dimensions: the operational, the cultural and the critical. *Operational* elements include the skills needed to become a competent meaning-maker and communicator, as in decoding and encoding multimodal texts and artifacts in various communication contexts, and being able to use various tools for participation and influence. *Cultural* competences relate to understanding literacies as cultural practices, including cultural signs used in communication and meaning-making. The third dimension of the model, the *critical*, refers to critical engagement with multimodal texts and artefacts of all kinds, as well as the ability to ask questions about power, intended audience and reception. In addition to these three important dimensions, MOI relates multiliteracy to agency and transformation—that is, understanding the affordances of different modes and media (Kress, 2010) for participation and influence and devising and developing productive ways of meaning-making and engagement in an increasingly diverse world. From this perspective, multiliteracies are seen as constantly evolving, intersecting, hybrid and transformative social practices (see also Frau-Meigs, 2013; Marsh, 2016; Potter and McDougall, 2017).

MOI pedagogy of multiliteracies

The pedagogy of multiliteracies advocated by the MOI programme places the child's curiosity at the centre of education and learning. It is considered important to acknowledge and connect to children's social ecologies and 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, et al., 1992) for sustained and progressive learning of multiliteracies. Rich, multimodal textual environments that encourage children to investigate, conceptualise, produce, share and make meaning are at the heart of supporting children's engagement with multiliteracies. Children are supported to become interpreters, producers and critical analysts of diverse texts in various multimodal communication settings. As they engage in educational activities of this kind, children draw on their various knowledges and skills (operational) to inform their creative production (cultural) and so come to understand how these knowledges are embedded in larger sociocultural contexts and value base(s) (critical) (see e.g. Green, 1988).

The pedagogical principles promoted by MOI involve multisensory, playful and story-like learning environments that encourage children to use their imaginative, creative and collaborative capacities (see also Leander and Boldt, 2013; Jacobs, 2013). In these rich textual environments, the culture produced by children themselves comes into dialogue with the culture produced for them in the form of fairy tales and stories, rhymes and poetry, music, TV programmes and films, digital games and apps. This rich, multimodal textual environment

invites children to investigate, interpret, use and produce texts for multiple purposes and audiences.

MOI learning environments are designed to form flexible, pedagogically coherent and continuous entities across the curriculum, drawing on children's social ecologies, including their home cultures and literacies. These learning environments can be situated outdoors and indoors, in nearby nature areas, parks and cities, in cultural institutions and in digital and virtual spaces. As shifting between different learning environments and contexts is considered important in learning multiliteracies, children's recreational and home culture cannot be overlooked.

As multiliteracy includes media and digital literacies, MOI also introduces a range of texts in digital modes and environments. Children are familiarized with various digital tools and media, apps and games in meaningful, playful and creative ways to reinforce the significance and safe use of these tools in their everyday life. Digital technologies and media are utilized to produce a wide range of content and meaning, and digital documentation also plays an important role in meaning-making, experimentation, production and knowledge exchange across children's social ecologies, as for instance between home and school (see also Potter and McDougall, 2017).

Ongoing research and development work

The MOI programme addresses the promotion of children's multiliteracies in practical and theoretical ways, based on empirical data drawn from Finnish early years, pre-primary and primary education, as well as from cultural settings, homes and communities. The programme aims to enhance multiliteracies among culturally and linguistically diverse children in inclusive and consequential ways. Collaboration and knowledge exchange between early years education centres, pre-primary and primary education settings and libraries and other cultural institutions aim to create a solid foundation for developing children's multiliteracy as a continuum across contexts and education levels from early years onwards (see also Kumpulainen and Erstad, 2016; Kumpulainen and Sefton-Green, 2014).

Ten communities situated in the metropolitan area of Helsinki are participating in the MOI programme, each including an early years centre, a primary school, a local library and other local cultural providers (e.g. theatre, museum, science centre, community centre) within the community. The participating children and their families represent diverse social and cultural backgrounds; in addition to those whose mother tongue is Finnish and/or Swedish, more than 20 percent of the children in each community also speak other languages. Altogether, about 1500 children and their guardians are participating in the MOI programme, along with 500 teachers.

The research and development work involves close collaboration between the academics, teachers and community members in the field in co-designing the learning environments and documenting, reflecting on and analysing their works across settings and over time from the perspective of children, teachers, families and institutions. Observation, video documentation and analysis, children's productions and artefacts, interviews and surveys of teachers, parents and the children themselves all contribute to building the MOI data corpus.

The MOI research methodology is inspired by the principles of the so-called 'social design' approach (Gutiérrez and Jurow, 2016), which aims to transform identified ethnocultural divides and inequalities in education through collaborative design and democratic forms of inquiry. Social design experiments involve the development of research-practice partnerships with multiple parties to address issues of social justice and equity and to provide more equitable learning opportunities, making the co-designed interventions more sustainable and capable of evolving over time (Gutiérrez and Jurow, 2016). Design-based research develops theory-driven learning environments while simultaneously conducting experimental studies to assess those innovations. This typically involves iterative cycles of implementing, assessing and refining practice. The social design methodology draws on the foundational work of formative interventions developed by Yrjö Engeström and colleagues (see e.g. Engeström, 1987; Engeström, 2008; Engeström et al., 1999; Virkkunen, Engeström et al., 2001).

Drawing on sociocultural theories, the MOI programme proposes that researching children's multiliteracies must take account of *temporality* (i.e. how children's multiliteracies develop and manifest over time) and *inter-related levels of analysis* (personal, relational and institutional). The personal level of analysis unpacks the diverse agendas, interests and identities that children and teachers bring to their engagement with multiliteracies. Attention is paid to how culturally and linguistically diverse children's learning of multiliteracies, as well as their agency and identity, changes as they relate to operational, cultural and critical domains. From the teachers' perspective, MOI research unpacks changes in their developing understanding of multiliteracies and pedagogical thinking in supporting children's multiliteracies in holistic and culturally sensitive ways. At the *relational* level of analysis, the programme investigates how teachers and other social and material resources support and/or hinder diverse children's engagement with multiliteracies. Analysis focuses on changes in epistemological (i.e. knowledge-related), ontological (i.e. identity-related) and ideological dimensions (i.e. values) as these manifest in emerging social interactions between children, teachers and other significant adults in the children's social ecologies. At the *institutional* level of analysis, the programme will investigate the sociocultural contextualization of pedagogies and learning environments within and between early years education centres, schools, cultural institutions and children's homes. In so doing, the programme seeks to illuminate the

conditions and barriers that mediate productive collaboration between educational institutions, cultural institutions and children's homes.

The MOI programme's multilevel approach is designed to enhance understanding and promotion of children's multiliteracies through (a) designed learning activities; (b) communities of practice; (c) knowledge construction and creation and (d) agency and identity formation. The programme strives to generate insights into teacher education, curriculum development and the design of pedagogies and learning environments that will promote multiliteracies for every child in and across social ecologies, in Finland and beyond, in culturally responsive ways. It is further hoped that the programme will contribute to global discussion on the meaning and purpose of multiliteracies in contemporary education and in societies at large. The results and outcomes of the programme will be made available from 2018 onwards.

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