Rethinking Multiliteracies: Deaf Children Storymakers in Ghana, India and Uganda

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Abstract

Deaf children are often marginalised in countries in the Global South, deprived of opportunities to access education through their L1, a sign language. We discuss a Storymakers project, adapting a multiliteracies resource from Finland brought into a program in four locations in Ghana (1), India (2) and Uganda (1). Taking an ethnographic perspective we investigate how the children's semiotic repertoires were expressed through diverse multimodalities, and what experiences and understandings of multiliteracies learning and teaching were enacted. Diverse findings demonstrate how the project was adapted and taken up by children and their teachers, leveraging multimodal capacities. This research provides support for the notion of semiotic repertoires as an inclusive notion and for a flexible approach to multiliteracies pedagogies.

Purposes

Deaf children are marginalised in many countries of the Global South, as explained by the World Federation of the Deaf: "Deaf children have historically faced many barriers to quality education, including a denial of quality education in sign language which has led to a denial of their rights" (Murray et al., 2016: 1). In this paper we discuss the findings from a small-scale Storymakers project brought into an established three year multiliteracies program supporting deaf teachers working with deaf children of kindergarden and primary school age in four locations in Ghana (1), India (2) and Uganda (1): "Peer to peer deaf multiliteracies: research into a sustainable approach to education of Deaf children and young adults in developing countries" (P2PDML) funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and Department for International Development.

Within this program we introduced a Storymakers project adapted from the Joy of Multiliteracies (Kumpulainen et al., 2018). The original resource was designed to encourage teachers of young children with non-dominant L1 (ie immigrants to Finland) to work with them to craft their own storybooks. The kit is centred on beautifully designed individual books with a templated semi-structured story space

to which children are invited to respond by drawing and/or writing or making. Teachers are also provided with resources to encourage creativity in thinking about narrative, characterisation, setting, emotions, etc. in a multiliteracies perspective

In P2PDML project, we adapted the Storymakers materials to suit the context of deaf children in the countries of our projects and their potential semiotic repertoires including through developing additional training materials for the teachers, including a training video. In each country and project location, the materials were then used by the tutors to offer a kind of curriculum unit around storymaking centred on the kit and often spanning several lessons over more than one week.

In this paper we take an ethnographic perspective to investigate how this resource, originally created in Finland and for hearing children, has been adapted and taken up by deaf teachers and children in countries of the Global South. Looking in detail at the teacher and students' agency in doing so offers new insights into multiliteracies pedagogies and how they can be made flexible and responsive to different contexts and learners, a kernel of educational responsibility.

Our research questions are:

"How are the children's semiotic repertoires expressed through diverse multimodalities?"

"What experiences and understandings of multiliteracies learning and teaching were enacted in this project?"

Theoretical framework

The multiliteracies approach to learning and teaching has often since its inception been regarded as a responsible position to pedagogy. At its outset the multiliteracies approach was concerned with taking a social justice approach to inequalities and diversities in the world (New London Group, 1996).

However recent discussions about how the multiliteracies approach has been applied have included a criticism that when it is recruited it into a formal curriculum then the focus on outputs, particularly those required for assessment purposes, may distort the creative impetus desirable in multiliteracies pedagogies of design. For example Leander and Boldt, (2013) demonstrated how much more rich and ultimately valuable were a child's interactions with Japanese manga when he was free to channel his design decisions in the moment, as opposed to when he was in school, constantly in danger of being characterised as failing owing to his low performance in set tasks. (Jacobs, 2013) argued for the continuing relevance of the multiliteracies framework but argued it should be more play oriented and open-ended than when typically applied in schools. These views suggests that the focus

on design that is very much part of the multiliteracies perspective can orient multiliteracies pedagogies towards 'products' (for example a multimodal text produced by a child) which are then in some way or the other evaluated.

Our work, as many others oriented to deaf communities, does not take a deficit-based approach to deafness as disability (Murray et al., 2016). Rather, we share the influential cultural-linguistic model of deafness proposed by (Young, 1999). As he explains:

> In a cultural-linguistic model of deafness an emphasis on impairment is supplanted by an emphasis on language use and cultural identity. That is to say, the key distinguishing feature of Deaf people is not that they cannot hear, but that they have their own fully grammatical, natural language…" (Young, 1999: 159)

So a bimodal understanding of deaf children's bilingualism appreciates that L1 is a sign language upon which other literacies including potentially English can be expanded on. Three broad principles lie behind the pedagogic approach of our mulitliteracies program and form a framework that is both theoretical and praxis.

First, we support recognition of sign languages as L1 as a vital component of asserting the rights of deaf children to education (de Meulder, Murray, & McKee, 2019); in our project Ghanaian Sign Language (GhSL), Indian Sign Language (ISL) or Ugandan Sign Language (USL). Second, since it is vital that teachers connect with learners' L1 then teachers must have sign language proficiency (Murray et al., 2016). A major component of the program is to provide such training and further to support deaf teachers and research assistants. Third, we recognised that grounding an education program in a multiliteracies perspective, making use of diverse multimodal approaches, can be implemented effectively from early childhood (Lotherington & Paige, 2017).

Modes of inquiry

The program works with deaf children, supported by deaf peer tutors (PT)s and deaf research assistants (RA)s in Ghana (1 location), India (2) and Uganda (1). Our collaboration includes detailed consideration of research ethics. For example the issue of using authentic images of children in stills and videos was discussed with participants and parents, and consent was negotiated appropriately.

A focus on images and multimodality of texts underpinned our pedagogic approach throughout training of participants. This extended beyond the use of picturebooks in the classes and into use of texts from the children's environment and examples of phenomena in their homes and communities. After initial training, we aimed to

support deaf teachers and research assistants to generate their own local curricula connecting to children's environments and interests implementing an open-ended orientation towards multiliteracies as design.

Dialogic spaces for research with participants were created in asynchronous and synchronous communications as well as during fieldwork.

Data sources

Availability of data varied across locations. We investigate the project through examination of artefacts (storybooks); project reports from teachers and research assistants; meeting logs; fieldnotes, and other data from the broader project. Principle sources of data are displayed in Table 1. In our approach to analysis, we move from a brief quantitative analysis to illustrative examples which we then discuss in relation to our research questions.

Table 1: sources of data

Data type	No. from Ghana	No. from India A	No. from India B	No. from Uganda
PT reports on lessons, consisting of texts and images on semi-structured form	5	1	1	3
RA reports, of lessons where present, consisting of texts and images on semi-structured form	1	0	0	0
Storybooks, (photographed)	0	9	10	9
Videos of children signing their storybooks	0	9	9	0

Findings and discussion

Table 2 displays linguistic analysis to compare the products, counting pages, words, sentences, type-token ratios and unclear words. We extended this to a simple quantitative analysis of pictures and length of video. We calculated the mean for each result in each location, including information about age.

Table 2: Overall findings

Findings	Ghana	India A	India B	Uganda
No. of storybooks analysed	3*	9	10	9
No. of videos analysed	0	9	9	0
Mean age	8.5	7.5	8	9.9
Mean no. pages	2	17.8	5.8	13.3
Mean no. words	3	31.2	34.2	77.3
Mean no. words/page	1.5	1.9	6.5	6.2
Mean no. diff words	3	19	21.1	39.7
Mean type-token ratio	1	0.57	0.71	0.52
Mean no. unclear words	0	4.7	0.9	6.7
Mean % unclear words	0%	14.40%	2.60%	8.10%
Mean no. labels present	0	28.3	7.4	14.2
Mean % labels	0%	80.60%	44.80%	20.20%
Mean no. sentences	1	0	6.1	12.2
Mean no. pictures present	1	16.8	3.4	9.9
Mean length (mins) of video	-	2.72	3.01	-

*3 No storybooks were presented as data artefacts in Ghana; this evidence is taken and analysed from images in PT/RA reports.

Findings indicate diversity in many ways. India A has the youngest children but by far the most words and pictures. There is a higher proportion of unclear words suggesting that the children were permitted to be more experimental in their emergent writing but tended to write single words: labels. In India B and Uganda there were far more sentences, with more words in Uganda overall. There were more pictures in Uganda overall, followed by India A then India B. Evidence from Ghana is limited but it nonetheless retained owing to other informative data.

We discuss three illustrative examples.

Example 1: Jitu, aged 5, India A extract from storybook

Figure 1: page 7 of Jitu's book

Jitu is in his third year at this residential school; when he arrived he had virtually no access to language. His great enjoyment of Storymakers project is evident through the scale of his efforts: he has produced a book of 20 pages. One has text only (his two names) two have elaborate drawings with several elements. The others all have images combined with words that label the entities in the image such as in Figure 1. The book's pages do not feature a narrative structure although there are some connecting elements; for example an umbrella motif appears twice.

Example 2: Tanvi, age 9, India B extract from video

Figure 2: Still from video of Tanvi signing her story

Tanvi has been at school for 6 years. She has produced five pages, which include two narrative stories. Figure 2 shows Tanvi signing an element of the second narrative. There are two characters, a girl and a boy were out in snow, felt cold and decided to go to buy tea. In this scene the two have continued playing, built a snowman and Tanvi has identified themselves as the girl of the story. Encouraged by her PT, Tanvi is using fluent ISL in the video.
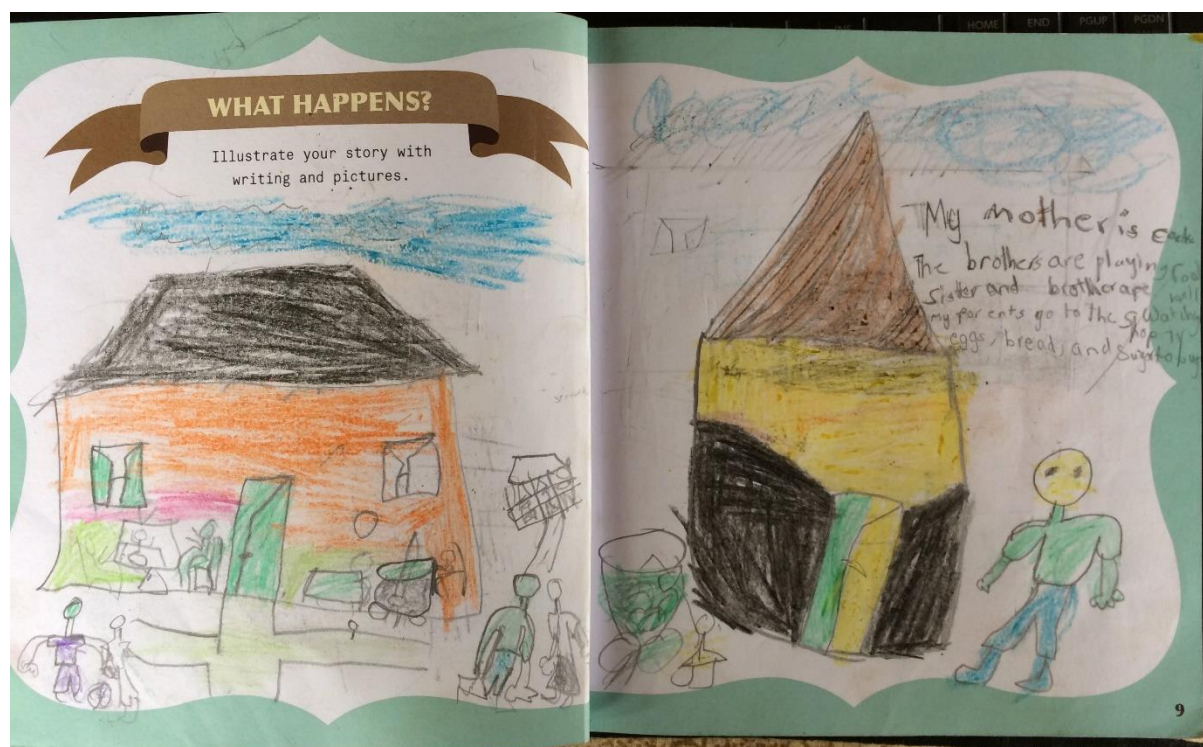
Example 3: Tifa, age 8, Uganda

Figure 3: Tifa: "What happens"

Tifa, as the other children in her class, began her storymaking activity with an elaborate drawing of a house, in her case with many people in it. Although the storybook is not a conventionally structured narrative story, there are connective elements. In Figure 3 Tifa is drawing and writing about the activities of characters introduced earlier, some of whom have gone to a shop. Her written English language is very well developed by the standards of the class.

Owing to the high quality of the materials the perception that perhaps they should be used for wholly "correct" English products was an inhibiting concern, especially in Ghana. The teachers in India too asked us initially whether they should correct children's writing and to what extend they should help to perfect a product. In India, during fieldwork by Author B, a PT suggested the children should draft their story first on plain paper before copying it into the books.

In all four locations, there were many indications of how the multiliteracies agenda was implemented fruitfully according to local priorities and the children's needs. For example, Jitu was part of a group in the small residential school in India where the focus was to develop the children's L1. English was introduced mainly through environmental print and with an initial focus on individual words, their meanings and how to spell them. His practice of providing detailed drawings with labels reflected what he will have perceived as a valued multimodal text in his school. The walls of the rooms in this small school were decorated with many examples of children's drawings of items labelled in English. There were also professionally produced posters of that type displayed and used for teaching.

Tanvi displayed a significant feat of translation: she is knowledgeable about both ISL and English syntax; earlier she also demonstrated translanguaging. Tifa developed drawing skills regularly valued in the classroom as a way of making sense of the local environment, while developing English literacies.

Scholarly significance of this work

These multimodal learners can leverage their multimodal capacities when appropriately supported to access English as their primary route to writing and reading, while otherwise expanding their semiotic repertoires in spheres of drawing, and performing to an audience. We have provided support for the concept of semiotic repertoire as an inclusive notion (Kusters, Spotti, Swanwick, & Tapio, 2017).

Our exploration of the intersections involved in transporting the storymakers project to different locations was revelatory of the complexity of diverse understandings of the project, from teachers' and children's points of view. Ultimately we connect multiliteracies pedagogy to our understandings of the storybooks as artifactual literacies: "…which] enable a different kind of learning, one that is located, drawing on personal and collective stories and heritage, and re-position learners as experts in the field of their own objects" (Larson and Marsh, 2015: 99). Photographic and video evidence showed children spending many hours turning these storybooks into their own valued multimodal texts. We return therefore to stress as an important aspect of the multiliteracies agenda encouragement of "a kind of learning which facilitates an active engagement with new and unfamiliar kinds of text, without arousing a sense of alienation and exclusion" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2006: 37).

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