

# **Literacy Practices in Transition**

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# **Literacy Practices in Transition**

**Perspectives from the Nordic Countries**

Edited by

**Anne Pitkänen-Huhta and Lars Holm**

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# Contributors

**Monica Axelsson** is an Associate Professor in Language Education at Stockholm University. She holds a PhD in bilingualism with special focus on Swedish as a second language, and her main interests include multilingualism, subject literacy and second language learning. In these fields, she has many published works to her credit.

**Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta** is a full Professor at Örebro University, Sweden. Her trans-disciplinary research encompasses traditionally separate fields like literacies, mono-multilingualism, multimodality, learning and identities (ethnicity, gender, functional disabilities, especially deaf). Using multi-scale ethnography, she studies everyday life, policy and socio-historical dimensions inside and outside institutional environments, primarily from anthropological, sociocultural and postcolonial approaches. She is interested in the policies and social practices related to *marginalization* and *equity* in different regional sites focusing on support systems (such as schools, health care and non-profit organizations). She is a board member of the Swedish Research Council and heads the multidisciplinary National Research School Literacies, Multilingualism and Cultural Practices in Present Day Society.

**David Barton** is Professor of Language and Literacy in the Department of Linguistics at Lancaster University and Director of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre. His main publications, with others, have been concerned with: rethinking the nature of literacy; carrying out detailed studies of everyday literacies; and exploring the relations of literacy and learning. His most recent book is *Language online: investigating digital texts and practices* (Routledge, 2013, with Carmen Lee).

**Anne Marit Vesteraas Danbolt** is an Associate Professor of Norwegian and Head of Department of Humanities at the Faculty of Teacher Education at Hedmark University College. Her research areas include literacy and second language learning, and she has taken part in several projects collaborating with primary school teachers. Together with Professor Lise Iversen Kulbrandstad, she has published the books *Tekstsamtaler* (Talking about Texts, 2005) and *Klasseromskulturer for språklæring* (Classroom Cultures for Language Learning, 2008). In addition, she has coordinated a Norwegian funded Master's Program in Literacy and Learning at the University of Namibia and the University of Zambia.

**Kristina Danielsson** is an Associate Professor in Language Education at Stockholm University. She holds a PhD in Scandinavian languages and her main research interests are subject literacy and multimodality. She has a number of publications to her credit in these fields.

**Line Møller Daugaard** is a Senior Lecturer and Head of Centre for the Study of Language and Literacy in VIA University College, Denmark. Her research interests are in linguistic practices in the language classroom. She is also working as a research assistant in the longitudinal research project, 'Signs of Language' (2008–2014), and in an ongoing PhD project, she explores minority language teaching in Danish primary schools.

**Anne Golden** is a Professor of Norwegian as a Second Language at the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo, Norway. Her main field of research is literacy in a second language, with a focus on vocabulary issues. She has published on second language acquisition, language in textbooks with a focus on metaphorical expressions, Norwegian grammar from a second language perspective, the use of learner corpora in research and identity in migrant narratives, as well as on the history of second language research and second language writing in Norway. She is one of the editors of *NORDAND*, the Nordic journal of second language research.

**Mia Halonen** earned a PhD in and is an Adjunct Professor of Finnish Linguistics in the University of Helsinki. At present, she works as a researcher in the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä. Her area of expertise is linguistic constructions of interactional practices which she has studied both in informal and formal spoken interactions and in writing practices in schools and social media. She has focused especially on practices by which participants 'perform and do themselves' and published on these issues from various angles.

**Lars Holm** is an Associate Professor and holds a PhD in literacy and globalization. His general research interests are in language and literacy in multilingual and postcolonial educational settings. He has lately carried out research in language testing concepts and practices in educational contexts, and he is working as an external researcher in the research project 'Signs of Language' (2008–2014), examining the literacy testing practices in multilingual classrooms.

**Rita Hvistendahl** is a Professor of the Teaching of Norwegian and Acting Head of the Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Norway. She has been an Adjunct Professor of Literacy at Umeå University, Sweden.



**Lise Iversen Kulbrandstad** is a Professor of Norwegian at the Faculty of Teacher Education, Hedmark University College, Norway. Her main research interests are literacy, second language learners, school development and teacher education. She has published several books and articles, among them *Lesing på et andrespråk* (Reading in a Second Language, 1998), *Lesing i utvikling* (Reading Development, 2003) and has co-authored with Anne Marit V. Danbolt both *Tekstsamtaler* (Talking about Texts, 2005) and *Klasseromskulturer for språklæring* (Classroom Cultures for Language Learning, 2008). Kulbrandstad is one of the founders and editors of *NORDAND*, the Nordic journal of second language research, 2006–2010.

**Elizabeth Lanza** is a Professor of Linguistics at the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo, Norway. Her main field of research is multilingualism, and her work is sociolinguistically oriented. She has published on identity in migrant narratives, language socialization of bilingual children, language ideology, linguistic landscape and research methodology. She is on the Editorial Board of *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* (Cambridge University Press), *Multilingual Margins* (University of the Western Cape, South Africa), and *IMPACT: Studies in Language and Society* (Benjamins). She is the leader of the interdisciplinary research project ‘Language, Culture and Identity in Migrant Narratives’ funded by the Research Council of Norway.

**Helle Pia Laursen** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research interests are in language and literacy in multilingual settings. She is working as a Project Director for the longitudinal research project ‘Signs of Language’ (2008–2014), which explores children’s interpretation and creation of signs in multilingual classrooms. She is one of the editors of *NORDAND*, the Nordic journal of second language research.

**Laura McCambridge** is a lecturer in English Language at the University of Jyväskylä. She is completing her PhD on the norms of English academic discourse in *lingua-franca* contexts. Her research focuses particularly on students’ writing practices on an International Master’s Degree Programme at a Finnish University.

**Anne Pitkänen-Huhta** received her academic training at the universities of Jyväskylä, Finland and Lancaster, UK. She received her PhD in English from the University of Jyväskylä in 2003. She works as a Professor of English, Language Learning and Teaching, Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. She is also the Head of the Department of Languages. Her research focuses on multilingual literacy and discourse practices, especially of young

people, and foreign language learning in formal and informal contexts. Her research employs ethnographic and discourse analytic methods.

**Sari Pöyhönen** works as a Senior Researcher (Language Education Policies) at the Centre for Applied Language Studies (CALS), University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research and writing deal with notions on language education and integration policies, and linguistic and ethnic minorities. Her doctoral dissertation in applied linguistics (2003) was an ethnographic study on Finnish language teachers' professional identity at the peak of the transition period of Russian education and teaching. At present, she is involved in two projects focusing on migrant education and language education policies, called Participative Integration in Finland (2010–2013) and Transforming Professional Integration (2011–2014), funded by the Academy of Finland.

**Åsa Wedin** is an Associate Professor in Education at Örebro Iniversitet and in Swedish as a second language at Dalarna University. She holds a PhD in Linguistics and her main research interests include multilingualism and literacy. She has published a few books for teacher education in these fields.

# Preface

The authors of this volume were brought together by a series of exploratory workshops, funded by The Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS) in 2009–2010. The aim of the series of workshops was to bring together Nordic researchers working on different aspects of literacy, multilingualism and the changing living and learning environments, and thus to initiate and promote critical research on literacy practices in the Nordic countries. The focal questions examined in the workshops were related to the processes of change in the literacy practices in Nordic countries, to the construction of identities and membership in and through literacy practices and to the role of education in responding to societal changes. The group of researchers included 20 scholars from four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The group came together for the first time in December 2009 in Jyväskylä, Finland, in the first days of winter with temperatures below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Most people did not know each other beforehand and our backgrounds differed quite substantially, but after two days of intensive discussions, it became clear that our work was connected and this connection was *literacy in transition*. Three more workshops were organized in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Oslo, and the foundations of the book were refined together.

This volume stems from the tradition of (New) Literacy Studies, which to us means examining literacy as a social practice rooted in the histories and cultures of societies and communities and in the personal trajectories and experiences of individuals. New Literacy Studies as an approach to studying literacy has always been sensitive to the changing contextual nature of literacy practices and thus researchers have been keen to open new gates and explore new territories where literacy has a role. Even the very beginning of literacy studies was rather radical, as it rose as an opposition to prevalent views of literacy as an autonomous and transferrable cognitive skill. Thus, literacy studies has been constantly spreading to new directions. This said, one can ask why this volume, why now? What *new* does this volume bring to the area of literacy studies, what *new* avenues does it explore and which *new* directions does it point to? As literacy practices are always contextual, there is bound to be something in the current societal context that calls for literacy researchers to stop for a moment and see where we are now and where we should be going.

Current Nordic societies are characterized by discourses of ‘knowledge economy’, ‘learning society’ and ‘life-long learning’, and this has raised education into a very high position on the general political agenda. Parallel to and embedded in this process are the constant and quick changes in the sociolinguistic and communicative landscape. In this volume, we seek to examine the nexus of the more and more complex sociolinguistic landscape and the increasing societal demands to education, and the consequences these have on literacy practices. Thus, our aim is to broaden the scope of literacy studies by showing how, on the one hand, the global flows connect to local literacy practices in specific settings and, on the other hand, how individuals make sense of, enact, contest and transform the culturally, historically and socially based literacy practices they encounter in their constantly mobile and changing life spheres.

We have chosen to use the word transition in the title of the book and this has several reasons. First, as a dictionary entry *transition* means ‘the process in which something changes from one state to another’ (*Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*) or ‘the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another’ (*OED*). What we wish to highlight with *literacy in transition* is the importance of taking a close look at the processes in which we find ourselves in, the processes which are fast, unpredictable and messy. Second, in linguistics *transition words or expressions* are words that signal how ideas are meant to relate to each other and they thus create cohesion in text or speech. In literature, *transitions* are similar elements that signal changes. With these linguistic and literary meanings of transition we wish to emphasize the integral relationship between processes of globalization and literacy, both for individuals and communities and both for practices and policies. Yet another meaning transition appears in is in the movement called *transition network*, which at the outset seems completely unrelated to literacy. An outcome of this movement is the establishment of transition towns in different parts of the world, which have taken local small-scale initiatives to tackle global challenges. The network ‘supports community-led responses to climate change’ and the initiatives ‘are actively and cooperatively creating happier, fairer and stronger communities, places that work for the people living in them...’ (<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>). With this meaning of transition we wish to highlight the centrality of examining literacy at the intersection of the global and the local and in that way empower the local actors to take initiative and challenge the global forces.

We wish to thank the NOS-HS for funding our project and the whole group of people taking part in the series of workshops and engaging in lively and insightful discussion on and around literacy: Monica Axelsson, Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta, Kristina Danielsson, Line Møller Daugaard, Qarin Franker, Anne

Golden, Mia Halonen, Rita Hvistendahl, Lise Iversen Kulbrandstad, Helle Pia Laursen, Ulla Lundqvist, Minna-Riitta Luukka, Laura McCambridge, Kirsten Palm, Sari Pöyhönen, Elina Tapio, Kari Tenfjord and Åsa Wedin. We also want to thank professor Sari Pietikäinen for her insightful comments on an earlier version of the introductory chapter.

Anne Pitkänen-Huhta and Lars Holm  
*Jyväskylä and Copenhagen*  
*June 2012*



# Literacy Practices in Transition: Setting the Scene

Lars Holm and Anne Pitkänen-Huhta

This book is about language, literacy and education. It is about mobility, change and complexity and the repercussions these have for people, practices and policies. Contemporary society is characterized by constant, fast and unpredictable mobility of people, goods, ideas and values. Literacy is often at the heart of the profound changes we are experiencing: when people and societies are on the move and in flux, literacy is inevitably an issue because it is something that is taught and learned, that is adopted, transformed and appropriated and that is used to categorize and classify people. Moreover, when people think about literacy, they automatically seem to link it with education – directly or indirectly. Changes in society have also led to the growing influence of supranational agencies such as the EU, the European Commission and the PISA consortium, which in different ways have relegated the regulatory power and authority of nation states by an up-scaling of certain educational concepts and perspectives (Collins *et al.*, 2009). Literacy is indeed in transition in our postmodern societies and since adequate literacy skills are considered a basic prerequisite for full participation in society, it is important to examine literacy practices in education. Recently, there have been calls for closer examination of the complexities of literacy practices in present-day societies in order to help understand the connection between global flows and local contexts (e.g. Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Baynham, 2004; Warriner, 2009).

Against this backdrop, this volume sets out to explore the intersections between transnational processes of mobility and the local, situated character of literacy in and around education. The close, detailed empirical analyses aim to unravel how these connections show in and have an effect on individuals, practices and policies. The chapters in this volume draw on literacy studies, (critical) applied linguistics and post-structuralist ideas of language and literacy as socially constructed. The detailed studies and descriptions of what is going on in and around literacy in education brought together in this book can hopefully be used not only as a springboard for further theoretical and