

Helping Young Children to Become Literate: The Relevance of Narrative Competence for Developmental Education

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Becoming literate is basically a process of learning to participate in the literate practices of a cultural community. A further analysis of this competence from a Vygotskian point of view reveals that it is grounded in the use of signs as tools for the organisation of human (communicative) activity. This is particularly evident in the context of children's play.

In order to deepen our understanding of this competence of coherent language use, we need to identify its unit of analysis. In this key note I will argue that 'narrative competence' is the unit of analysis of this competence. It encompasses elements of ability, disposition and cultural constraints (like genre, conventions). Using Vygotsky's idea of topic-predicate development, we can psychologically explain 'narrative competence' further as a competence to elaborate an intended *topic* (a theme or an issue one has in mind) for communicative purposes with the help of verbal qualifiers ("*predicates*").

Becoming literate is closely related to this ability to develop a topic in an orderly and culturally accepted way. Examples will be given of this process based on the analysis of authentic texts of 6-year-old children.

Finally, the key note will illustrate how this narrative competence is fostered in the context of Dutch Vygotsky-based education (an approach we call 'Developmental Education') in the early grades of primary school (ages 5 – 7). In this approach the traditional focus in schools on reading as an introduction to literate practice, is replaced by a focus on 'narrative competence' (particularly communicating and authoring with all available means). Reading, then, emerges as an outcome of children's productive communicative activities. Matters of assessment will also be discussed; the assessment of narrative competence will be based on narratives written by pupils in response to a picture.