

# Literacy and Multimodality in Swedish Teacher Education: Understanding and Bringing Together Theory and Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Grundlärautbildningen för årskurs F-3 har i uppdrag att förbereda blivande lärare så att de förmår att stödja barns kommunikation och lärande genom språk och olika modaliteter. Denna artikel fokuserar på hur dessa lärarstudenter kan stöttas att utveckla kunskap kring de teoretiska begreppen literacy och multimodalitet så att de kan utgå från och ta stöd från denna kunskap när de planerar för och genomför klassrumsundervisning i årskurs F-3. Den metodologiska designen tar avstamp i en enkätundersökning, vilken visade att en majoritet inte alls kände till eller var osäkra på betydelsen av begreppet multimodalitet såväl som begreppet literacy. Den här artikeln fokuserar på de resultat som framkommer från de fyra fokusgruppintervjuer som genomfördes med 15 av studenterna ett halvår efter enkätundersökningen. Analysen av intervjuerna belyser vikten av a) undervisningsmoment som ger utrymme för lärarstudenters eget reflekterande om literacy och multimodalitet, b) deras eget praktiska 'görande' när det gäller hur deras förståelse av begreppen kan omsättas i klassrumspraktiker i F-3 med utgångspunkt i olika ämnesinnehåll. Med utgångspunkt i resultatet, menar vi att det är väsentligt att lärautbildningen tillvaratar lärarstudenters praktiska och situerade lärande genom workshops och seminarier. Resultatet belyser vidare behovet av en starkare konsensus inom lärautbildningen gällande den avgörande roll som olika modaliteter för kommunikation spelar för barns lärande.

**Nyckelord:** literacy, multimodalitet, lärautbildning, teori och praktik

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between theory and practice in teacher education is both complex and challenging. Several studies reveal that student teachers do not always see the value of learning theories or how they could benefit practice (Paulin, 2008; Bronäs, 2006). This indicates a “gap” between theory and practice (Hegender, 2010). Nationally, as well as internationally, studies show that theory in teacher education is primarily taught in campus courses (Karlsson Lohmander, 2015; Rönnerman & Salo, 2012; Hennisen, Beckers & Moerkerke, 2017; Peercy & Troyan, 2017). This implies that knowledge of educational theories is not always connected to classroom practice.

Scaffolding the nexus between theory and practice is a process that takes place over time and depends on interaction related to specific purposes and content. According to Bruner (1977), learners require scaffolding over time in order to become self-governing learners, a process similar to the process of becoming a full participant in any sociocultural practice as described by Lave and Wenger (1991). Stoner (1993) emphasizes that, in learning to be able to act as, and gradually become, a self-governing learner, agency and interpersonal learning processes are crucial. “Agency” here refers to intentional actions aiming for a specific goal, which includes autonomy in the sense of making your own well-grounded choices when acting as a teacher in classroom practice (Priestley et al., 2015). When student teachers are given time to collaboratively reflect on specific conditions for classroom teaching and learning through the lens of a certain theory, their ability to conduct a qualitative teaching and learning situation in the primary classroom will most likely increase (Bie, 2015; Timperley, 2008). In particular, reflecting on learning theories might mean that student teachers become better prepared for the pedagogical challenges and choices that they will face as future teachers in the classroom (Liberg, 2012; Selander, 2017).

This article focuses on student teachers’ understanding of theories of *literacy* and *multimodality*, and examines in what ways student teachers draw on these concepts when designing teaching and learning in preschool class and grades 1-3. Thus, this study examines the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education. The study took place within two of the first courses in the teacher education programme: Campus course 1 and Practice course 1. The courses took place over a period of 15 weeks, which implies that the student teachers were given time to process the theories. Also, the courses were designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, which is why we find it interesting to examine whether and how student teachers benefitted from pedagogical theories when designing teaching and learning in classroom practices. In the following section, we will give a brief introduction to multimodal literacy.

### Multimodal literacy

Over the last four decades, the definition and meaning of “literacy” has broadened and evolved. From entailing only the ability to read and write, literacy is now interpreted as using language in socially and culturally situated contexts (see e.g. Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993). Further, multimodal forms of expressions impregnate Western societies of today, which has an impact on how children develop language and how they think about communication.

Barton (1994) proposes that literacy, including different modes of text, takes place on different occasions in life. This multimodal perspective on literacy highlights how different modes and types of text, such as talk and gestures, are combined in communication. According to Kress and Van

Leeuwen (2001), all communication is multimodal and includes several interacting semiotic systems. The New London Group (1996) has identified five comprehensive systems to define meaning making: *written and linguistic* (the use of vocabulary and grammar); *visual* (the use of, for example, colour, light and shadow); *audial* (the use of sound, music, noise and silence through pitch, volume and rhythm); *gestural* (the use of hands, facial expressions and body language through speed, stillness, and rhythm); and, finally, *spatial* (the use of proximity, direction and position). Jewitt (2008) emphasizes how pedagogical classroom work can be understood as a multimodal process, since interactions between students and teachers are included, as well as a multifaceted and multimodal text repertoire, as found in, for example, interactive digital boards, tablets and computers and various digital applications. In relation to this “new” understanding of literacy, communication and meaning making within classrooms have become increasingly interactive, visual, non-linear and also imaginative and interpretative (Hassett & Curwood, 2009). Multimodal texts that children encounter include texts in theatre, video games, movies and picture books. When children play, dramatize, draw, paint, write and compose stories, modalities are combined, such as gestures, colour and script.

However, Street (1993) suggests that dominant literacies within a society and its institutions, are often presented as autonomous, i.e. as neutral and decontextualized from social and cultural practice. Hence, there is a discrepancy between theories of multimodal literacy and how various literacy practices are valued. This is also the case in Schmidt’s (2018) study, in which she sheds light on how children’s vernacular literacy experiences are not always recognized as “proper” classroom literacies; she stresses the crucial need to draw on children’s diverse literacy experiences. From children’s perspectives, vernacular literacies can, for example, be manifested through the use of popular culture, which often creates feelings of joy, as shown by Fast (2007). The student teachers in this paper are learning the significance of multimodal literacy in order to understand the meaning of different literacy practices they will encounter in the classroom, and how to use these in a learning context.

Drawing on the plurality of texts and media in current societies, Luke and Freebody (1997) argue that effective literacy learning needs to integrate and balance the practices of coding, functional use, meaning making and critical analysis of texts. Comber and Nixon (2004) describe this literacy approach as a focus “not only on what children read and view, but also on what they design, compose and produce across a wide range of genres, medias and modes” (p. 116). Serafini (2012), expanding Luke and Freebody’s literacy theory, emphasizes the need to “include visual images and design elements, in addition to written language” (p. 152). In an approach that is similar to Luke and Freebody’s (1997), and with the purpose of equal participation for all children in diverse classrooms, Cummins (2001) highlights that it is crucial to combine and integrate a focus on *meaning* with a focus on *language* and on *use* in order to efficiently scaffold all children’s language and knowledge development. These three focuses address the need to make any content comprehensible and to draw on the same content for active language use while continuously integrating aspects of language, such as sounds and letters or the knowledge of genres, and also various visual, audial and gestural modes.

In light of these theories of multimodal literacy, teacher education has to prepare primary school teachers to take into consideration children’s multifaceted multimodal experiences, and to support them in encountering these experiences. This means enhancing student teachers’ knowledge of how to teach in a multimodal way. In the long run, this is a way of ensuring future generations’ basic

rights to develop a communicative competence that is adequate for the times in which they live. It entails a shift from focusing only on breaking the reading and writing code to focusing on communication through various forms. Further, it might mean that teachers creatively design education in ways that provide opportunities for inquiry and imagination linked to certain knowledge requirements as well as the surrounding world (Schmidt, 2017).

In teaching and learning practice, student teachers therefore have to encounter and try out different modes such as visual art, drama and music as means for supporting language development among young children. These modes are not separated from reading, writing and verbal expressions but are instead intertwined with them. Examining how student teachers reflect on pedagogy, didactics and methodology in relation to their understanding of multimodal perspectives on literacy should be of interest to teacher educators and researchers.

## Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine how student teachers understand the concepts of *literacy* and *multimodality* through two successive courses in a teacher education programme, and in what ways they draw on these concepts when designing classroom teaching and learning in classroom practice in preschool class and grades 1-3.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Teacher education in Sweden is governed by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) on behalf of the Swedish government. Primary school teacher education in Sweden is a 4-year full-time programme in which four of the total of 22 courses are practical courses, each worth 7.5 ECTS credits<sup>1</sup>, and two courses are in teaching Swedish in primary school, each worth 15 ECTS credits. At the University of Gothenburg where this specific study<sup>2</sup> took place, the primary school teacher education programme, apart from including two 15 ECTS courses in teaching Swedish in preschool and grades 1-3, also includes a 15 ECTS course that focuses on language as a communicative resource and builds on a multimodal perspective that, in addition to written and spoken modes, includes aesthetic modes such as visual art, drama and music. The content of this course is connected both to the syllabus for the school subject Swedish and to the general curriculum for compulsory school (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011).

The study was conducted in 2017 within the two interrelated courses: Campus course 1 and Practice course 1, in which 100 student teachers were enrolled. The campus course ran from March to May 2017 (10 weeks), and the practice course ran from August to September (5 weeks). The practice course, which followed directly after the campus course, involved being in a classroom with a supervising teacher. The campus course was held at the university, lasting for 10 weeks in the very first semester of the student teachers' period of studies, and had, as indicated previously, a broad focus on children's communication and meaning making. In this course, the student teachers were introduced to the concepts of literacy and multimodality for the first time, both in theory lectures and seminars, and in various practice-based workshops. This implies that through the course literature and the workshops, the student teachers were exposed to views on these concepts that were similar to those presented in the theoretical background to this paper.

The practice course took place during the student teachers' teaching practice in preschool class and in grades 1-3, after which four group interviews were conducted. The student teachers' task during this first practice course was to plan and teach a multimodal language lesson based on the idea that different means of meaning making are not isolated but almost always appear together: image with writing, speech with gesture, math symbolism with writing, and so forth. The assignment was to read aloud from a picture book, and to follow this with multimodal work on the content. The student teachers were asked to video-record parts of the lesson during this multimodal work<sup>3</sup>. In this study, we want to shed light on the student teachers' conversations regarding theoretical understanding and related practical activities carried out during teaching practice.

The content of the two courses focused on in this study was constructed by the course teachers in order to facilitate multimodal activities such as drama, visual art and music, and how to use these when working with 6–9-year-old children's communication in preschool class and grades 1–3. The campus course included lectures, seminars, workshops and examinations. The two main theoretical concepts in both courses were multimodality and literacy.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study has a hermeneutic approach with regard to the methodological design, including the concluding analysis of the empirical material (Gadamer, 1975). A prerequisite for making appropriate interpretations is knowledge of the context in which a study has been carried out. In this study, this means understanding what the student teachers described and expressed in relation to education, pedagogy and didactics of teaching and learning language, and in relation to their role as student teachers as well as their role as teachers. Also, self-reflexivity is a prerequisite when listening to, interacting with and analysing the student teachers' expressed thoughts (e.g. Davies, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989).

The methodological design takes its starting point from a survey that was answered by 70 student teachers in March 2017. The design's main focus is on the results from four focus group interviews with 15 of the student teachers, carried out 6 months later. The survey consisted of two questions: (1) One core concept in this course is literacy. What do you know about this concept? (2) Another core concept is multimodality. What do you know about this concept? Both questions had three possible answers: *unfamiliar concept*; *recognize it but am unsure of its meaning*; *acquainted with the concept*. A blank space was provided for comments and further information. The intention with the survey was to obtain an overview of the student teachers' understanding of the concepts of literacy and multimodality before they encountered them in the first course. The focus group interviews espoused a participatory and reflective approach to the student teachers' understanding of the two concepts and their experiences of drawing on these in classroom teaching. This methodological approach was chosen with the purpose of creating active and dynamic discussions, making it possible for several views and experiences to be voiced among the student teachers (Halkier, 2010; Wibeck, 2010).

During the focus group interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. The interviews started with a short introduction stating the purpose of the study, and then the participants were invited to describe their experiences of designing and conducting classroom

work on multimodal literacy. Just before the interviews, the student teachers had had a final examination for the practice course, in which they gave a presentation on how they had conducted the multimodal classroom assignment. Hence, the experience from that practice initially permeated the interview conversations. During the interviews, the student teachers talked about their own experiences, but also reflected on their shared experiences from listening to other student teachers talk about this assignment and from watching other student teachers' video recordings, and on what they felt they had learnt from the process. The student teachers were then encouraged to reflect on what these experiences had to do with literacy or multimodality. Finally, the student teachers were encouraged to explain their current understanding of the two concepts, and at the same time to describe in what ways they had gained this understanding. Clarifying questions were asked when needed, for example: "Can you give an example?" or "Can you clarify that statement?" The group interviews were conducted on campus and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All interviews were carried out and audio-recorded on the same day, and then transcribed verbatim afterwards.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The authors of this paper have extensive experience of teaching and supervising in primary school education. Both authors have taught the campus and practice courses previously, but not to this group of student teachers. We are, however, aware that we are recognized and viewed by the participants as university teachers at the actual university. Also, we are aware of the different roles of being a student and being a university lecturer/researcher, and the power structures involved.

The interviews had an explorative approach. The focus was on capturing the student teachers' understanding of theories of literacy and multimodality, and determining in what ways student teachers draw on these concepts when designing teaching and learning. This means that the student teachers could reflect and answer in different ways, and hence there were no demands from us for a "right" (versus "wrong") answer.

Before inclusion, the student teachers were informed about the purpose of the study and asked whether any of them would be interested in participating. Those who gave their written consent to participate were all female students, and have in this paper been given fictitious names to protect their identity during and after the study.

## ANALYSIS

A qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) was used to analyse the empirical data. Throughout the process of analysis, we drew on hermeneutic perspectives when analysing the content (see, e.g. Gadamer, 1975), which means that we moved from the whole to a part and back to the whole, and from pre-understandings to understandings, and so forth. In a hermeneutic approach we used our pre-understanding to understand a new phenomenon (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Previous research and our choice of theories and methods formed part of this pre-understanding. This implies that we needed both to look closely at the empirical data and to distance ourselves from these; also, we needed to be aware of our own preconceptions and pre-understandings.

The analysis was conducted in four steps: (1) the audio recordings were transcribed; (2) code words, from student teachers' reflections, such as "literacy", "multimodality", "teaching", "learning", "reading", "expressions" and more, were identified in the transcriptions; (3) excerpts from the

student teachers' reflections, using these code words, were then carefully selected. In the analysis process, we identified four recurring themes in the material, as discussed under "Results". These themes were weighed and assessed in order to find the most reliable descriptions possible.

## RESULTS

The initial survey reveals that the majority of the student teachers are unfamiliar with the concept of "multimodality" and unsure about or unfamiliar with the meaning of "literacy". Six months later, during the group interviews, their reflections touch upon several aspects regarding children's possibilities for communication and meaning making in the classroom. Also, the student teachers' utterances allude to their own learning processes regarding these possibilities. In the student teachers' reflections, some intertwining themes are being developed. Two significant and intersecting themes are first, the practices of the practice course and, second, the practices of the campus course. The third theme concerns the theoretical concepts of literacy and multimodality and, lastly, the fourth deals with the intertwining of these three themes.

In the following section, the themes are presented in the following order: *classroom practice*; *concepts of theory*; *campus-based practice*; and *intertwinement of practice and theory*, followed by a short summary.

### Classroom practice

When sharing their thoughts about a multimodal perspective on literacy, the student teachers all draw on their own experiences from planning and conducting classroom teaching in preschool class and in grades 1-3 during the practice course. The multimodal assignment that the student teachers conducted in various classrooms resulted in lessons that combined the shared reading of a picture book with multimodal work related to the content, such as dramatizing, art making (drawing, paintings, photographing or sculpturing), singing and film making. Several student teachers relate that children's motivation to participate during lessons increased when they were invited to use several modalities. In the following excerpts, Lisa emphasizes how the children become more engaged<sup>4</sup>:

When I did this assignment with the children ... children that I've seen when they have been working normally, sitting still and calculating and writing and not standing out very much, now they had a chance to do that, which was a happy surprise. I think it was good to see how they dared to take up space when they felt secure in another way, how they shone, seized the moment and learned.

Continuing on from Lisa's comment, Malin says,

I also saw changes. Some children ... we have a few in the class who have concentration difficulties, who maybe lose focus when they have to write, and then when you speak about it [instead] they are as involved as the others.

In the two quotations, Lisa and Malin refer to their teaching practice in general, and, more specifically, to the multimodal assignment. It is in relation to the multimodal assignment that was carried out in the classroom that Lisa reflects that some children, in her view, started standing out more. She also states that these particular children were able to learn through the use of several modalities.

These reflections of Lisa's could be interpreted as suggesting that she sought to make the classroom practice equal for all children regarding their opportunities for participation. Malin points out that, according to her, the children were "getting involved" to a greater extent. At the same time, Malin seems to dichotomize between oral and written communication, almost as though children can always choose between one or the other. These two quotations show a multimodal approach to teaching and learning, that is, an approach including the use of different modes. The reasons for using several modes and forms of expression seem to be based on the notion of equality by encouraging communicative participation.

Several student teachers stress the importance of recognizing children's own experiences and specific interests, and including these in the classroom practice. Below, Ronja reflects on this possibility, saying that this is something that teachers in general do not often do.

**Ronja:** I feel that [at the school] where I am I suppose they do not consider the concept [of multimodality] as we have talked about it here in this course. That you should start out from the children's interests; instead it is shut out a bit, I suppose, and you go on with something else instead [...]

**Author 1:** If we take the concept of literacy, if it permeates the teaching, how do you think that would look and be carried out?

**Ronja:** That you try to build it up around what you see that [the children] show an interest in.

**Author 2:** Can you give an example?

**Ronja:** Many [children] draw Pokémon of course, but this is something we never talk about ... we could have made so much more of that!

The above excerpt highlights, in line with Barton (1994) and Fast (2007), that Ronja recognizes that literacy takes place on different occasions in children's lives. She argues that the children's own experiences could have been included in the classroom practice. Through this comment, Ronja can be said to question autonomous classroom discourse regarding children's communication and meaning making (Street, 1993). In other words, Ronja shows an awareness that teachers have pedagogical choices, not only regarding how to teach, but also with regard to what content to include and why. These choices are not, as Street (1993) puts it, autonomous. Rather, they are ideological since they are part of power structures within a society and its institutions. In this way, Ronja's reflection can be interpreted as indicating increased professionalism since she is already starting to combine the pedagogical question of "how" with the pedagogical question of "why".

## Concepts of theory

Another student teacher, Karin, says,

... if we had not known the significance of literacy [here she is referring to the course literature and campus-based teaching] we would not have been able to recognize and embrace the literacy that is to be found in children's whole lives and in their different "backpacks".

Karin seems to be taking into consideration the conditions and possibilities for children's communication and meaning making through the lens of theories on multimodal literacy. Her reflection shows an understanding of children's various literacy experiences and the power structures regarding these in terms of dominant and vernacular literacies (Schmidt, 2018; Street, 1993). In response to this comment, another student teacher explains: "This image of a backpack has really made an impression." The metaphor of a backpack relates to Fast's ethnographic thesis about seven children's path to literacy, which was part of the course literature. In this thesis, Fast (2007) uses this metaphor to visualize children's differing social and cultural capital for literacy (see Thomson, 2002). Fast (2007) shows that some children are invited to draw on their literacy resources, while others are not. Once again, the beginning of an awareness regarding children's vernacular literacies, for example their popular cultural experiences of video games or social media, is shown. This awareness connects to children's various different backgrounds.

The results also reveal a desire among the student teachers to include opportunities for children to make meaning through multimodal forms of expression from the beginning of the preschool class and onwards, as well as to include these expressions in contextual ways:

**Ronja:** It [multimodality] has to be part of something bigger ...

**Karin:** ... so that the children get more opportunities to ...

**Ronja:** ... yes, that you try to kind of get them to be a part of it, right from the beginning.

In the last reflection, the idea returns of making classroom practices more equal through the use of several modalities. In the excerpt above, Ronja and Karin can be said to give voice to a view where they are inviting the children to take part in classroom communication and meaning making, and giving them opportunities to do this. The issue of children's participation appears to be crucial. In the quotation below, Malin emphasizes that literacy is everywhere in various ways:

It [literacy] is everywhere. [It is about] capturing their interest, and letting them work with things that engage them. But also, that it is more than reading and writing a text. It is in school and everything we do there, it is through media, through commercials; it is everything.

The concept of literacy is here understood by Malin as being more than reading and writing. It is also being linked with children's popular cultural experiences of commercial media in their everyday life. In line with Barton (1994), Malin views literacy as the use of texts and their various modalities, which takes place on different occasions in, and in different areas of, life.

For the majority of the student teachers, the multimodal perspective on children's communication and meaning making in the early school years was, as mentioned previously, unknown or unfamiliar at the beginning of their studies. When given time to reflect on their experiences, and again drawing on the multimodal assignment, Stina and Nour express the following:

**Stina:** I think that this [multimodal communication and meaning making] is great. It is innovative, and the future so to speak, this is how we work today. If I compare it with when I went to school myself! I thought about it today when I was in a music lesson where the teacher showed YouTube clips with music videos and she asked

beforehand: How do you feel when you see and hear this? It is so broad and you can make it even broader. And more and more of this is coming now. So much fun!

**Nour:** That you are more confident, that you know that there is research that says – this is also a good way of working.

**Stina:** If we had not talked about ... that it was ok to use music in [the subject] Swedish ... I probably would just have thought that if it's Swedish, they should learn to read and write. Now I have felt the freedom to use different modes and to mix in the pupils' interests.

The student teachers' reflections in the above quotation are expressed in a way that suggests that they have discovered something that they did not know before and that they now think is genuinely positive. Stina makes comparisons with her own time at school in terms of "then" and "now", and expects future classroom practices to be multimodal. Here again, the theme of narrow classroom discourses returns, in terms of what it is possible to do or not, like combining a subject such as music with the subject Swedish, and hence combining modes of pitch, volume, rhythm and vocabulary with one another. Emancipatory feelings are expressed in the reflection "I have felt the freedom to use different modes and to mix in the pupils' interests", feelings that are essential to the ability of student teachers to make their own well-grounded choices (Priestly et al., 2015) and become full members of the practice community of teachers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This ability to carry out intentional actions also strengthens student teachers' agency (Stoner, 1993). The student teachers' thoughts on what might be possible to achieve in classroom practices of communication, and in what ways, seems to have been widened through their comprehension of multimodality.

## Campus-based practice

All the student teachers highlight the importance of the multimodal workshops in campus-based practice, which, among other components, entailed a one-week storyline<sup>5</sup> including dramatization and role play, art-based activities such as painting and playing music, and a multimodal examination, performed as a small show. The student teachers stress that the opportunity to "try it out for themselves" has been important for their learning:

**Nour:** But now, when I think back, I realize that I would not have done it if someone had only stood there and told me about it (...). Then I would only have taken notes and forgotten about it (...). But when I also got the chance to do it, then you take it with you in your baggage in a totally different way.

**Wilma:** Now it gets more real, there are such clear pictures. If someone had just lectured it would not have given that understanding.

The significance of seminars and workshops relates both to the understanding of the concept of multimodality as such and to the understanding of how to translate and transform it into classroom teaching and learning. In the excerpt below, Emma and Nour relate classroom practice to parts of the Swedish national curriculum. We interpret this as implying that Emma and Nour are starting to carry out and design education that provides opportunities for inquiry and imagination, in a way that is linked to the curriculum as well as to the surrounding world (Schmidt, 2017).

**Emma:** There is so much support in [the curriculum] that you can work like this too. And that is as important as writing.

**Nour:** Yes, it says in the curriculum that you should use all of these things like computers, and so on. But now you have really tried it, and dare to include it a little more, and see that this is also a way of learning.

In the above excerpt, the use of different modes in teaching is viewed not only as a method or as a way to make lessons more fun, but also as learning processes for communication and meaning making.

## Intertwinement of practice and theory

The ability to integrate experiences and newly acquired knowledge from the campus course into their teaching practice is described as crucial by several of the student teachers, and below is one example of this:

**Nour:** I feel that it was only when I came out to [the practice course] that I could see what advantages this has ... when you do this with the children, they get on board in a completely different way. Then I felt that this is a really good way of working.

Nour is referring to the children's response in terms of positive engagement and motivated participation. She also refers to the importance of participatory ways of learning within the campus course, such as seminars and workshops, when stating that lectures alone are not sufficient for her learning. She emphasizes the importance of "doing", as in workshops. Another student teacher, Rebecka, tells that "it was really good to be able to do something yourself". In the following quotation, a student teacher describes how much she can rely on her theoretical understanding of the concept of literacy in her classroom practice.

**Ronja:** It feels so positive that you have been so "fed with" literacy and multimodality so that you have it with you ... all the time out there.

Several other student teachers express that the content of the campus course has supported their understanding in various meaningful ways. They describe the seminars in terms of the possibilities they create for student teachers to discuss and think out loud: "... to be able to listen to others' thoughts and to get a chance to talk about it yourself". Also, many of the student teachers agree that the reading of Fast's (2007) thesis has been significant for their understanding of the concept of literacy.

**Stina:** Who was it that wrote that thesis with several chapters?

**Author 2:** Carina Fast?

**Stina:** Exactly, I learned a lot there, really.

## Summary

The results suggest that it is *through practice* that student teachers develop an understanding of the two concepts, drawing on both classroom-based and campus-based practice. Theories of multimodal literacy also play a crucial role in developing an understanding of the significance and implications of multimodality and literacy. Being able to actively participate emerges as crucial for

the student teachers' own understanding of both theory and practice of multimodal literacy. We interpret the empirical data to mean that it is when theory is being contextualized in relation to children's literacy practices within and outside school that a deeper and more complex understanding of multimodal literacy is gained. Hence, the constructive alignment between the two courses seems to scaffold student teachers' self-governing, which is implicitly highlighted as an essential feature of teacher education. The concept of multimodality and the opportunities for communication and meaning making through various modes seem to inform the student teachers about the *many ways* of doing this, and that children with various needs and circumstances can learn to dare to "take up space" through this.

The student teachers viewed children's opportunities for using various modalities as opportunities for participation. In addition, the student teachers' understanding of the concept of literacy seems to have supported them in recognizing children's various literacy experiences and, to some degree, to have inspired them to take into consideration children's various habits regarding this when designing classroom teaching and learning. Apart from providing rich opportunities for participation, the various modalities were viewed, though less importantly, as also opening the way for opportunities to support children's language and literacy. To put it simply, modalities are not highly related to competencies in literacy, in the student teachers' view. At this stage of their studies, the student teachers did not yet in a totally convincing way explain why and how multimodal classroom work might support children's literacy development in efficient and meaningful ways.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we have elaborated on student teachers' comprehension of multimodal literacy and the didactic implications of this understanding, revealed in their own design and orchestration of teaching in classroom practices. Based on these results, there is a strong link between the two courses that brings together the content of the first campus course with the assignment of the practice course. It could therefore be argued that we could have predicted the results of this study. However, previous statements from student teachers, claiming the difficulty of linking theory and practice, show that teaching does not always lead to understanding of the process (Paulin, 2008; Bronäs, 2006). The analysis of semi-structured interviews in this study cannot provide evidence for what exactly supports students teachers' understanding of literacy and multimodality. Also, it is important to remember that the participating student teachers, as with all student teachers, are in a position of dependence on their teachers. Another aspect of the trustworthiness of this study is that the interview situations in themselves may have contributed to the student teachers' learning. Nevertheless, we argue that this study elaborates on dimensions within institutional practices of teacher education that we believe it is necessary to discuss and problematize, namely how to prepare student teachers for classroom practices that are characterized by various modalities and media.

As we see it, the crucial bottom line is that practical forms of teaching and learning within teacher education, like workshops and seminars, should be combined and linked together rather than being held in isolation. By this we mean that theoretical concepts of multimodal literacy should be related to the more practical forms of teacher education, and, oppositely, that lectures with the purpose of introducing and unpacking the same theories should also include examples from classroom practice. In this way, we believe that student teachers might be better prepared for classroom multimodal literacy practices and, further, may be better able to connect their pedagogical choices of "how" to

the pedagogical question of “why”. The results illuminate how the student teachers need to discuss and reason in dialogical ways, in order to learn and deepen their knowledge (Holton & Clarke, 2006). The student teachers emphasized the importance, for them as future teachers, of doing and practising “hands on”, as in the multimodal workshops. The constructive alignment between the two courses sheds light on the importance of scaffolding the nexus between theory and practice, and shows that this is a process that needs time and interaction to develop. This is in line with scaffolding theory as Bruner (1977) describes it, i.e. it is a process leading to becoming a self-governing learner and a full participant in the practice as a teacher (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In addition, the results shed light on the significant role that the practice course plays for student teachers. Teacher education is hence dependent on good relations with schools and supervising teachers. Describing the campus-based practice, the student teachers emphasized their own learning processes and the role of the teacher educators as role models, showing examples of actual teaching methods. In relation to the classroom practice, the student teachers emphasized both the children’s learning processes and how to best facilitate the inclusion of multimodal lessons. In both these practices, student teachers are in a position of dependence in relation to their various university teachers and towards their supervisor during the practice period. Acting with agency as a teacher during practice is crucial for the student teacher’s learning in the process of becoming a professional teacher (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stoner, 1993).

The student teachers illuminated the impact of the campus course in various ways, and expressed that it was only when they themselves were able to use multimodal literacy with the children in the classroom during the practice course that they properly understood the concepts and their implications. As we see it, it was through this rather demanding assignment in the campus course, namely of combining the shared reading of a picture book with multimodal work, that powerful classroom literacy practices could be realized. Examples of such literacy work were the dramatizing, drawing or film making of the picture book’s content. The student teachers said that it was through their teaching experience in the classroom that they were able to see the various benefits that multimodal expressions for communication and meaning making might have for children.

One obstacle that the student teachers mentioned is that many of their supervising teachers were not familiar with multimodality and literacy or with the kind of pedagogical approach that these concepts suggest. Hence, there may be a gap between what student teachers learn on campus and what they encounter and have to handle in classroom practice.

In the process of interviewing, we noticed that comprehensive views of learning through literacy and multimodality emerged when the student teachers reflected on their teaching practice in general and, more specifically, when they reflected on the children’s responses to using various modes. In this study, however, it is of interest that many of the student teachers did not seem to view communication through various modalities as also creating possibilities for scaffolding aspects of written literacy. Instead, some student teachers seemed to dichotomize between oral and written communication, as if children in classrooms can choose between one or the other. The suggestion that children can simply choose the mode they prefer implies that student teachers may put too much faith in children’s capacity to identify how they learn and which modes suit them best in their learning processes. It may also imply an overconfidence in what can be achieved through the use of different modes. This simplistic view of learning is probably due to the fact that these student teachers are at the beginning of their education and that they are trying to understand what each different mode

can “do” for children’s communication. By focusing only on music or on popular culture, they are missing the significance of *multimodality*, and thus losing the interplay between and combination of different modes, i.e. the possibility of combining, for instance, music with oral language, or visual art with written language. This one-dimensional understanding or misapprehension informs all of us of the student teachers’ need for scaffolding, which can be achieved by applying a deliberate, gradual strategy using a combined scaffolding approach (Puntambekar & Kolodner, 2005). However, it does seem that the student teachers’ agency had already been strengthened by the time of the interviews and that they had become more self-governing learners, and had thus managed to begin to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Another dimension of student teachers’ somewhat simplistic view of the process of learning based on the concept of multimodality is the lack of a critical approach. This is shown especially in the excerpt regarding social media such as YouTube. Student teachers may overlook, or be unable to picture, what young children can be exposed to through social media, such as gender reproduction, exclusion and hatred. Consequently, in this respect too, teacher education needs to include critical perspectives on how to integrate popular culture in general, and social media in particular, into classroom practice, in a way that can raise awareness as well as bringing in a “fun” element, thus introducing the benefits of different media and modes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Supporting children’s communication and meaning making in efficient ways means making any content comprehensible and facilitating further active language use by drawing on this content through various modalities in combination (Cummins, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997). We view the latter as being highly essential when designing classroom literacy practices in diverse societies, with the purpose of equal participation for all children, and consider this as a crucial question in teacher education. In line with the aim of this paper, we believe that the questions of how to design multimodal literacy work among children, and why we do multimodal literacy work, needs to be more thoroughly addressed in teacher education. In order to achieve this, theory and practice need to be interrelated and equally drawn upon.

Finally, we would like to stress that designing multimodal classroom practice does not mean losing sight of the written language or of fundamental literacy skills; rather, it means carefully designing all modes in ways that scaffold and support young learners most efficiently. Altogether, the results of this study place demands on us as teacher educators and on the national teacher education as a whole so that future primary school teachers will be able to (1) integrate multimodal communication into classroom practice and (2) connect theory and practice of multimodal literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> ECTS = European Credit Transfer System, which refers to the number of credits given for a course.

<sup>2</sup> This study was part of a larger project aimed at developing the local teacher education programme at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg (see Franck, 2019). In this paper, we draw on parts from previously presented results of the study (see Häggström et.al. 2019).

<sup>3</sup> The video recordings were made in such a way that no child could be identified.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from student teachers have been translated from Swedish by the authors.

<sup>5</sup> The Storyline method is a creative teaching and learning approach that uses the components of storytelling. The teacher plans a sequence of episodes that challenge the students in different ways through problem solving and art-based pedagogy (see, e.g., Bell, Harkness & White, 2007; Omand, 2017).

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Understanding and Bringing Together Theory and Practice

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Timesignaturer i kroppsøvingsundervisning med utgangspunkt i  
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Att lära om och genom metaforer: litteraturarbete med vuxna  
andraspråksinlärare

*Robert Walldén*

"Då får man typ en annan bild ibland som hjälper en." Elever i  
årskurs nio resonerar om litteratursamtal.

*Eva Hesslow*