"I feel like I cannot manage without her" – literacy brokers for recently immigrated adolescents with little prior experience of school-based learning

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This study explores how a teacher at a Swedish language introductory school is perceived as a literacy mediator or literacy broker (Brandt, 1998) by a group of migrant adolescents with limited prior formal education. Beyond traditional language acquisition elements like grammar and vocabulary, these students are navigating emergent literacy in a second language while adapting to a new society (Gee, 2005). My research is guided by two main questions: (1) How do the students report that their teacher supports their engagement in literacy practices? (2) What do the students think about the fact that certain literacy practices seem to be enabled while others are hindered? Conducted during the 2017/18 school year as an ethnographic case study in an introductory language class, the investigation utilizes field notes, recorded interactions, field conversations, and formal interviews with nine students. The analysis reveals the students' appreciation for the teacher's support in meeting new literacy standards, while also highlighting their acceptance of the devaluation of some prior literacy practices as a strategic choice to facilitate engagement in mainstream society's literacy practices (Nocon & Cole, 2009; Janks, 2010). The study also discusses the students' opportunities to express themselves, both in interviews and within the classroom, in connection to these findings. Additionally, the concept of literacy sponsorship is explored in relation to these discussions.

Keywords: literacy brokers, emergent literacy, migrant adolescents

1 Introduction

The 21st century has seen an increase of adolescent migrants arriving in Sweden, many of whom are new to print literacy and school (Skolverket, 2017; Franker, 2016), although new regulations have resulted in less immigration since its peak in 2016 (Migrationsverket, 2023). Migrant students who are 16–19 years old and have received limited or no formal schooling receive schooling in language introductory groups (Swe: *Språkintroduktion*) to attain a degree for upper secondary school (Skolverket, 2017). As these students develop emergent literacy in a second language, they also face the challenge of integrating into a new society. Acquiring proficiency in an additional language and developing literacy

within a new sociocultural environment includes mastering grammar, script decoding principles, and new vocabulary, but also the capacity to participate in discourses that may have been unfamiliar to the students previously (Gee, 2015; Kramsch, 2009; Winlund, 2019). Moreover, this educational process must consider emerging multilingual practices, not only within the confines of the classroom, but also in semiotic spaces (Gee, 2005) extending beyond its physical boundaries. In this educational context, the teacher might play a crucial role as a mediator of literacy, or a *literacy broker* (Brandt, 1998). The purpose of the present study is to investigate how a group of recently immigrated adolescent students in a Swedish language introductory school describe a particular teacher as a literacy broker.

According to Brandt's definition, *literacy sponsors* are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way" (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). This seems to align with the typical responsibilities of a teacher. However, Brandt also asserted that teachers are unlikely to exploit the literacy practices their students develop, instead opting for the term "conflicted *brokers* [emphasis added] between literacy's buyers and sellers" (1998, p. 183). This terminology underscores the teachers' position as intermediaries between students and the ideologically charged literacy demands of society. However, a critical approach to literacy education (Luke, 2012; Gee, 2015) might suggest that teachers are also likely to have their own agenda in their literacy instruction and, like literacy sponsors, can "enable and hinder literacy activities, often forcing the formation of new literacy requirement while decertifying older ones" (Brandt, 1998, p. 179). This ambivalence in terminology prompts an exploration into how a specific teacher is characterized as a literacy broker by the students who participate in the present study. The following research questions are investigated: (1) How do the students report that their teacher supports their engagement in literacy practices? (2) What are the students' thoughts about the fact that certain literacy practices seem to be enabled while others are hindered? I also discuss the implications of the investigated literacy education on the students' language learning and literacy development in mainstream society (Nocon & Cole, 2009; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). This examination is particularly relevant when considering the imperative of social justice in the exploration of language learning issues, as emphasized by Ortega (2019). The study also serves as an attempt to amplify the voices of students with limited educational backgrounds, a demographic often underrepresented in research, as noted by Young-Scholten (2015) and Brännström et al. (2019).

2   Navigating societal literacy norms

This study focuses on the education of students who have limited or no previous experience of formal schooling, with particular emphasis on their reported view of the teacher's support of their engagement in *literacy practices* (Street, 1984). Accordingly, I draw on sociocultural perspectives of literacy as I look at what the teacher and students do with literacy, rather than what cognitive processes are involved in the students' emergent literacy. Thus, literacy is perceived as interactive activities that can be used in different ways in different domains of people's lives (Barton, 2007, p. 52). According to Gee (2015), literacy development includes learning new discourses, which involves not only using language in a certain way, but also behaving, dressing, or moving in a way that is consistent with this language use. Gee writes of Discourses with a capital D when referring to different ways of manifesting belonging to a language community by "dancing the dance" (Gee, 2015, p. 172); this means behaving in a certain way to fit into the community, including language use. This view on language and literacy learning resonates well with Kramsch (2021), who suggested that "[l]anguage gives us the power to organize and classify things in the world, but it also has the power to discipline and restrict our knowledge" (Kramsch, 2021, p. 8). Kramsch emphasized that

when we learn a new language, we need to not only be open to learn its grammar and vocabulary, but also its culture and ways of thinking. According to Gee (2015), the same is true for the development of literacy. Consequently, a literacy broker should serve as a knowledgeable guide across diverse literacy practices and discourses.

Gee (2015, p. 173–175) further distinguished between primary and secondary discourses. Primary discourses are acquired from childhood, within the family and through informal learning, while secondary discourses must be acquired in later life in formal contexts such as school, religious gatherings, or club life. In some cases, the primary and secondary discourses are similar, which makes it easier for the individual to adjust to and acquire them. In other cases, there may be a large discrepancy between the primary discourses a child has been socialized into at home and the secondary discourses the student is expected to learn in school, which can make it difficult for the student to succeed in their new context. Furthermore, Gee (1989) highlighted the importance of making a distinction between acquisition and learning (cf. Krashen, 1982). He argued that the most effective way of acquiring new discourses is through social interactions with individuals who are already proficient in them, as these provide natural contexts. However, he contended that formal, explicit instruction – or students learning in formal settings – is sometimes necessary in order to gain the capacity to manipulate and critically engage with different discourses. Thus, the teacher acting as a literacy broker in the actual educational context might play an important role in enhancing students' emergent literacy through the literacy practices and discourses that are explicitly taught in the classroom.

The literacy theories described above emphasize the importance of providing newcomers with access to the literacy practices of the majority society and the types of texts that are privileged in school and society. At the same time, diversity should be respected by encouraging students' own expressions of history, values, and identity (Nocon & Cole, 2009; Janks, 2010). As described in the introduction, learning to read and write in a new language in a new society requires not only cognitive effort, but also adaptation to a new linguistic and cultural landscape. Admittedly, literacy instruction can be facilitated if it is related to one's own experiences (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000). However, students also need to be challenged to take part in different literacy practices to navigate different contexts (Nocon & Cole, 2009). Literacy instruction can then bring new perspectives, especially in relation to the norms of society. Navigating these diverse perspectives can be a challenging task for teachers, which is why the literacy broker concept, with its emphasis on valuing certain practices over others, proves valuable in exploring this aspect of literacy instruction.

3   Teachers as Literacy Sponsors – or brokers?

Brandt's sponsorship concept (Brandt, 2001) emerged out of a comprehensive analysis of 80 interview scripts with American people born from the mid-1890s to the early 1980s, providing insight into the lived experiences of those involved. When analyzing and comparing the memories of people from different generations, Brandt (2015) was "struck by how thickly these recalled scenes of literacy learning were populated by interested others who came and went over the course of a lifetime and whose presence and power varied by socioeconomic, political and generational circumstances" (2015, p. 330). In the study, Brandt endeavored to treat research participants not as objects of study, but rather as observers of socio-historical evolution (p. 331). Thus, the description of different persons' paths to literacy not only conveyed personal stories, but also analyzed the social and economic forces that shape society. Brandt's work is constructed on the beliefs that individual stories are beneficial evidence of literate experience, that we need to take context into account when studying literacy and ultimately that literacy sponsors facilitate access to literacy instruction and practice (2001, p. 9).

Brandt's concept of literacy sponsorship has been applied to different contexts, such as studies of the ways in which religious institutions sponsor adolescent boys' literacy practices (Van Duinen, 2017) or how siblings or teachers can serve as literacy sponsors in the home or at school (Smith et al., 2020). Wedin's (2015) interview study examined the participation of five newly arrived youths in literacy practices, and the role of literacy sponsors, or *mediators*, in that process. The concept could then be used to show which literacy practices the youths had participated in in their countries of origin, and which people could support them in the new country. For example, two of the informants described how their literacy skills enabled them to act as mediators, since they could read and write for others who were not able to do so. Often, someone who needed help reading or writing a letter about personal matters or financial matters would come to them for help (Wedin, 2015, p. 94). According to Wedin (2015, p. 95), a certain status was attributed to these boys' relatively simple literacy skills, which would not have been the case in Sweden, where literacy requirements are much higher. In Sweden, they experienced the importance of those who could support their reading and writing – relatives, friends, teachers, and other school personnel; as a result, the participants in Wedin's study had developed the literacy skills they needed to begin upper secondary school and handle official documents required by the asylum process (Wedin, 2015, p. 104f.).

Brandt (2015) emphasized that the notion of literacy sponsors has been wrongly applied in writing studies and education in the past, frequently being transformed into a less menacing idea (p. 330) than what she had first envisioned:

> Sponsors are entities who need our literacy as much or more than we do. They are investors, cultivators, exploiters, proselytizers, innovators, and they are in competition with other sponsors for the formidable powers and benefits that can come their way via our literacy. (Brandt, 2015, p. 331)

This means that literacy sponsors may have their own agenda that may not always align with the goals of the individual seeking to build their literacy skills. Another misuse of the concept that Brandt (2015) pointed out is that researchers often miss the part of the definition that states that the persons should "gain advantage by it in some way" (1998, p. 166). According to her perception, this phrase excludes teachers, who are "[n]either rich nor powerful enough to sponsor literacy on our own terms, we serve instead as conflicted brokers between literacy's buyers and sellers" (1998, p. 183). However, the teacher's role is a key factor that Brandt (2015) discussed when examining how the concept has been used and often misinterpreted:

> Our favorite sponsors are those selfless teachers and other helpers who have no ostensible ulterior motives except a belief in and love for the goodness of literacy. In this atmosphere, sponsors become conceptualized as heroes and benefactors, plowing open opportunity for grateful learners. Literacy learning is euphemized. And so is literacy teaching. (Brandt, 2015, p. 331)

As Brandt's critique indicates, this perception of the teachers' role in literacy education does not correspond well with a more critical approach to literacy (Luke, 2012; Gee, 2015), whose representatives would argue that literacy instruction is in no way a neutral activity. By learning to read and write, students become empowered in their ability to participate in literacy practices (2015, p. 88). However, language and other semiotic systems can also preserve and reproduce power relations (Janks, 2010, p. 23; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Luke (2012) explained that critical literacy involves an openly political approach to teaching and learning, which ultimately involves critiquing majority ideologies to achieve social justice. Students must learn how and why texts are constructed in different ways and for whose interests they are written (Luke, 2012, p. 5ff.). To summarize, Brandt's (2001) theoretical concept of literacy broker might be challenged when it is used to analyze the role of the teacher in different contexts, as is the case in this article. The following

section will further describe the collection and analysis of data of the ethnographic study presented in this article.

4 Context for the study and data collection

This investigation is part of a larger ethnographic case study in which empirical data were collected during the 2017/18 school year at an introductory language program. This program is offered to newly arrived students who have not obtained their elementary school diplomas to qualify for admission to high school (Skolverket, 2023a). The program is sometimes placed within ordinary high schools, but in this case this inner-city school, located in a large Swedish city, exclusively offered courses for migrant students who wish to study basic subjects, develop print literacy, and improve their Swedish language skills. Regularly, after a preliminary interview (with interpreters) about their previous school experiences, students are evaluated for their literacy and Swedish language proficiency and placed into groups accordingly within this program. My study focused on a group of learners with the least formal schooling, and their teacher Elisabeth,[1] whom I had met through a university project. Elisabeth is in her sixties and has 20 years of experience teaching students with limited formal education. She is highly regarded by both present and former students. Elisabeth is also the lead teacher who is pedagogically responsible for this category of students at her school. Her expertise and strong connection with students and staff were what drew my attention to her classes. Her student group consisted of 13 students from Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Gambia, although only nine students who attended this class regularly and for the whole year of the study are included in this study. My focus was on Elisabeth's lessons in Swedish as a second language and introductory social sciences, while the students also attended basic English, mathematics, physical education classes, and mother tongue instruction, taught by other teachers. According to the Swedish Education Act (Sveriges riksdag, 2011:185), students with a first language (L1) other than Swedish are also entitled to language tutelage in their L1 if the student needs this. Consequently, Elisabeth was assisted by language tutors of Farsi and Somali, who came to the classroom twice a week. Some students, like Adam, lacked access to mother-tongue instruction and study guidance in their native language (L1) due to the absence of available tutors. Instead, Elisabeth provided Adam with additional assistance in English or Swedish.

As indicated in Section 3, Brandt's original methods for data collection mainly included interviews with participants and considering other research about social and economic tendencies in society. According to Brandt, the data collected in ethnographic studies with the purpose of gathering primary information about people's activities in specific contexts (Hammersley, 2006) may not be comprehensive enough to investigate the external forces that could further reinforce the arguments (Brandt, 2001, p. 8). Yet, an argument could be made that enhancing participant interviews with ethnographic observations could result in a more comprehensive understanding of the literacy broker's role. This approach goes beyond relying solely on participants' recollections of literacy experiences, offering a glimpse into their day-to-day lives, such as their experiences in school. In the current study, conducting interviews with students whose languages I did not share posed challenges in terms of fully grasping their responses. Nevertheless, observing their practices, even those left unmentioned in interviews, provided additional insights. This underscores the advantage of employing an ethnographic study, allowing the researcher to explore the participants' culture and practices, as highlighted by Martin-Jones and Martin (2017).

I investigated this education as a participant observer for two to three days each week, spending three to four hours per day, for a total of 165 hours over the course of the school year. During observations, I positioned myself at the back of the classroom, tak-

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1. The names of teachers, tutors, and students are pseudonyms.

ing field notes and recording audio to capture the dynamics of interactions. Additionally, I actively engaged with students, helping with assignments, and engaging in conversations during lessons or break time, to establish a rapport between researcher and participants, providing insights into their written and oral expressions. However, I was careful not to disrupt their interactions with the teachers, ensuring a non-intrusive observation approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In addition to ethnographic observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine of the students, one with each student, either individually or in pairs, in Swedish, English, or in Somali with the assistance of their Somali tutor, Mohammed (see Table 1).

Table 1.   Interviews with students

Name	Reported spoken languages other than (some) Swedish	Reported years of formal schooling	Interview	Length of interview
Adam	Mandinka, English	0	Alone in English	28 minutes
Amina	Somali, some English	0	With Balqis, in Somali	42 minutes
Balqis	Somali, Amharic, some English	0	With Amina, in Somali	42 minutes
Fuad	Somali	0	With Zubeyr, in Somali	47 minutes
Hamid	Dari, Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish	0	Alone, in Swedish	20 minutes
Maram	Somali, Arabic, some English	0	With Sumaya, in Somali	44 minutes
Samia	Somali, Arabic, some English	2	Alone, in Somali	28 minutes
Sumaya	Somali, some Arabic, some English	3	With Maram, in Somali	44 minutes
Zubeyr	Somali, English, Swahili	0	With Fuad, in Somali	47 minutes

These interviews focused on the students' language and literacy experiences prior to coming to Sweden and on their thoughts about the instruction that I had observed. The interview with Adam was conducted in November 2017, after two months of observation, and the other eight students were interviewed at the end of the school year. After much consideration, I chose to enlist the language tutor, Mohammed, as an interpreter during these conversations. I had perceived him as a well-liked person to whom students willingly turned with questions beyond just academic matters. Additionally, he was accustomed to interpreting and seemed to make the students feel comfortable during the conversation. Admittedly, there was a risk that he might be perceived as a teacher by the students, potentially influencing the responses given. Against this risk, the alternative would be to invite an unknown person to interpret, which seemed even less favorable. Since the interpretation was done simultaneously, there was also a risk of misinterpretation of the students' responses. Therefore, I engaged an authorized interpreter to verify the transcripts of the answers that Mohammed had conveyed with the recordings of the students' answers in the interviews.

5   Data analysis and ethical considerations

Within the larger ethnographic case study described in the previous section, conceptual memos (Heath & Street, 2008) were regularly written to identify and highlight recurring patterns in the extensive dataset, which could be further analyzed through a content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings have been presented in separate articles exploring various aspects, including the support provided by teachers and language tutors for the literacy practices of students (Winlund, 2020), the students' involvement in

discourses that may be considered taboo to them (Winlund, 2019), their learning process in adhering to school rules (Winlund, 2022), and the engagement of three students in writing practices (Winlund, 2021). These findings provided insights into the teacher's role in facilitating the students' emergent literacy development. For the present article, I wanted to further explore the data in order to focus on the students' view of this education, particularly their perceptions of the role of their teacher. Consequently, for this paper, a synthetic, deductive analysis was conducted in search of examples of the students view of the teacher's literacy brokering. As described in Section 4, I used observations of the interactions in the classroom to supplement the student reports on how the teacher supported their engagement in literacy practices, as well as their thoughts on the fact that certain literacy practices were favored, while others were devalued. I analyzed my data in two cycles (Saldaña, 2009). Initially, I highlighted transcripts of interviews for occurrences of students talk about literacy brokering and relevant sequences in the field notes. These examples were manually extracted to a separate document and categorized based on my research questions.

This study followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). All students mentioned gave informed written consent with the help of language tutors and their answers have been anonymized, although it is important to consider that participants may struggle to understand the implications of participating in a research study (Ljung Egeland et al., 2023). Prior to the interviews, I sought to make it clear to the students that they did not have to answer my questions and that they could discontinue their participation whenever they wished, although I understood this could be difficult for them. Nevertheless, my impression is that they were not disturbed by my presence in the class and seemed comfortable talking with Mohammed and myself in the interview situation, even when the teaching and discussions sometimes touched on sensitive subjects. However, I cannot be sure that they were not tailoring their responses to what they thought I would like to hear, being a representative of the mainstream society and potentially having an unclear status as a school representative.

6   Findings

The findings were categorized into two sections that aligned with the research questions: the students' accounts of how the teacher supported their engagement in literacy practices, and their expressed views on the fact that certain practices were valued or devalued.

6.1 Enhancing learning: Teacher as facilitator of literacy practices

Throughout the larger study that has been conducted in this group, the results indicate that the teacher supports the students' engagement in the literacy practices that were expected in this instruction (cf. Winlund, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). This is also why the teacher is so eager to ensure the students attend school. At one point, I heard Elisabeth call the institution where one of the students, who had come to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor, resides, clearly upset with what she considered a sign of negligence of the staff working there. She told them that they had to make sure the student came to school: "It's good for the promotion of health, you know". She was angry when she hung up the phone, but soon calmed down and began walking around, greeting the students who had arrived in the classroom (Translation of Field notes, 13 September 2017). She later clarified her outburst by emphasizing the importance of having students with limited prior exposure to formal schooling actively participate in the classroom, learn school practices, and develop literacy: "Because they have to learn from me. They cannot read on their own at home. They have to see how I do it" (Personal communication, 5 February 2019). This comment aligns with the statement of one of the students, Adam,

in the interview. He grew up in the Gambia and had not received any formal schooling before coming to Sweden at the age of 19. He did have experience in Qur'anic schools, where he was taught to read religious texts using the Arabic alphabet. However, the lack of a sponsor to pay the school fees meant that he was unable to continue his formal education. Despite this, Adam was able to learn to read a small amount on his own, using the signs around him on the streets of the big city where he grew up. He explained that he gains knowledge by observing others and that he now observes the teacher's practices: "Yes, that's how you learned in Africa, maybe you can do theory now" (Interview with Adam, 22 November 2017). Here, Adam expressed the understanding that a beginner needs to learn from an expert by imitating their practices, but he further suggested that his learning can be enhanced by theoretical explanations, thus implying that he would prefer both implicit learning and the explicit instruction of a literacy broker (Gee, 2015).

The students not only acquire knowledge by mimicking the teacher's practices though; rather, they benefit from her interactive and multimodal instruction. On one occasion, I asked Balqis and Amina about their perspective on Elisabeth's teaching. Balqis answered:

> First of all, I can say that she is a very patient teacher and the second thing is that she does not take all students in the same way, but she teaches each student in his or her own way, not taking all the students in the same way. (Translated interview with Balqis, 18 April 2018)

Thus, Balqis emphasized the teacher's efforts to adapt the education to everyone's needs, utilizing various teaching methods. Amina agreed with this statement and added another comment:

> What she does well is that she helps us understand in an easier way. We can't understand or pronounce the word correctly so she also uses her body sometimes, she stands there and dances the whole thing, yes. (Translated interview with Amina, 18 April 2018)

Like several other students, Amina commented on Elisabeth's skill at employing various strategies to help them comprehend new vocabulary. My ethnographic observations support their statements (Winlund, 2020, 2021). For example, the teacher employed concrete objects to make abstract concepts easier to comprehend. She also organized field trips to familiarize the learners with their environment, such as different parts of the city, the marketplace, or the archipelago, and utilized these experiences to enlarge their linguistic repertoires when they were engaging with new vocabulary in the classroom. Furthermore, Elisabeth often employed the students' linguistic resources to make content comprehensible. The language tutors facilitated this process. Given that the tutors were only available for two hours per week, Elisabeth had to resort to diverse modalities, including drama, music, images, and movies, during the remaining time to ensure the content's comprehensibility. This is what the students said in the interviews makes her a great teacher. Amina also highlighted another common characteristic of the instruction:

> Another thing I can mention about her teaching is that it does not just stay in the school but also continues when we are outside of school, with contact through WhatsApp where she posts lessons and homework so that we can work at home and prepare moments for the teaching in school … We have her all the time [giggles]. (Translated interview with Amina, 18 April 2018)

The students recognize that this teacher cares for them and extends literacy practices beyond the classroom walls by utilizing digital technology, such as a WhatsApp group. This enables her to stay in contact with the students and facilitates their learning by assigning homework and providing reading materials. Samia, who was interviewed on her own, also felt that Elisabeth is a special teacher. She has previously studied at

another school and, when comparing the teaching at her old school with this one, she felt that she has gained more knowledge of the Swedish language in the new school. She attributed this to Elisabeth's teaching:

> We have more homework here and she follows each step we make to make sure we have understood this, have you understood this, have you done this? That's what I think makes her unique compared to ... and among other things, we have exams here that we have never had before in the other school, so we write much more than before in school. These are the points that make her as special as she is. (Translated interview with Samia, 2018-04-20)

Samia pointed out that Elisabeth has strict demands of her students and highlighted the testing and control as beneficial factors. One practice that many of the students pointed out as being rewarding is the dictation controls that Elisabeth uses every week:

> So it will be easy for us to be able to write more Swedish, in the way she does the exam it encourages us to be able to write and write correctly as well. (Translated interview with Sumaya, 2018-03-28)

Thus, the students were unanimous that they were very fond of Elisabeth and that she was instrumental in their development of literacy practices. Zubeyr even went so far as to say that she was indispensable:

> One hundred percent, always, everything is good. It feels like even if I go to another school, I cannot manage without her, I think. No one else can teach me […]. (Translated interview with Zubeyr, 2018-03-12)

In this excerpt, Zubeyr clearly expressed his view of Elisabeth as somebody who could make the complex content and practices of school familiar to him and support his development in a way that no one else can. Furthermore, Samia not only acknowledged Elisabeth's pedagogical practices and her encouragement of the students, but also emphasized the high standards she sets for them. The teacher's high demands will be discussed further in the following section.

6.2 Teacher establishes clear rules for classroom content and student conduct

As stated in the introduction, a literacy sponsor, or broker, can both enable and hinder literacy activities. This can involve "the formation of new literacy requirements while decertifying older ones" (Brandt, 1998, p.179). In the previous sections, we have seen examples of the students' reports on how Elisabeth enabled them to engage in various literacy practices. My ethnographic observations (Winlund, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022) also revealed that she promoted certain school practices, while other practices were devalued. The students' opinions about this will be further illustrated in the following sections.

The ethnographic observations in this classroom showed that the teacher distinctly defined the content to be taught in the classroom and the expected behavior of the students. In this role, the teacher could be considered a broker, aligning the instructional content and behavioral expectations with her interpretation of the school's demands. A prior examination of the ethnographic data (Winlund, 2022) revealed three discernible categories of negotiated practices: (1) distinctions between conduct and the regulations governing time and space, (2) utilization of literacy artifacts and practices, and (3) interactions with other individuals within the school environment. An example of one of the recurrent discussions in this classroom was students' use of mobile phones. Clearly, phones could be distracting and make it difficult for students to focus on what was happening in the classroom, such as when Elisabeth introduced new concepts or interacted with the whole class. On the other hand, mobile phones could also open new learning

opportunities, such as when Zubeyr joined chat rooms to practice his English, when some of the girls accessed religious apps during breaks (cf. Daugaard, 2019), or when the students used translation devices. This could be a useful tool for improving literacy, even though measures might be taken to ensure that phones do not become a distraction. Discussions also involved guidelines for students to maintain an upright posture while writing, considerations on how to interact with their peers, and expectations to behave "as other students do".

When asked whether Elisabeth was overly strict – such as when requesting them to surrender their phones or expressing frustration when they arrived late to school – Amina's response was as follows:

> It's true. But I can see that what she is doing is kind of for our benefit, so that we can make the best use of our time. (Translated interview with Amina, 2018-04-18)

Amina and Balqis seemed to recognize that Elisabeth is doing what she believes is best for them, so that they can learn in an optimal manner, underscoring her role as a literacy broker. Furthermore, Amina acknowledged that, if she were Elisabeth, she would likely be annoyed if her students arrived late. However, Balqis still felt that Elisabeth "is easy to get along with and does not easily lose her temper" (Translated interview with Balqis, 2018-04-18). As Zubeyr concluded: "she has invested in us" (Translated interview with Zubeyr, 2018-02-12). This statement signifies Zubeyr's belief that the teacher is genuinely committed to their success.

Thus, the teacher appears to prioritize certain literacy practices over others, leading some students to interpret this as a deliberate effort to better prepare them for future academic pursuits. In addition to prioritizing specific literacy practices, the teacher also placed importance on discourses, such as defining the concept of family, which became evident during vocabulary lessons related to personal presentations. These examples, which have been analyzed in depth in another article (Winlund, 2019), provide an example of an education that seeks to promote inclusivity and prevent homophobia, as Elisabeth tells the students that families can look in different ways and that they are entitled to their own opinions on the matter, but that they cannot say it aloud. Elisabeth explicitly expresses her desire to ensure that students do not appear to be homophobic and aligns her teaching practice with the curriculum (Skolverket, 2023b), which emphasizes learning more about same-sex relations and avoiding discriminatory talk. This further demonstrates her commitment to creating an inclusive learning environment, aligning with the accepted norms of mainstream society as reflected in the curriculum. At the same time, this suggests a lack of regard for the primary discourses (Gee, 2015) that students may have been exposed to and might wish to articulate. However, Amina and Balqis both agree that this education is useful to them:

> We do live in this society. We shouldn't scream at them, so she prepares us for this because it's not common in our country to see a guy with a guy. (Translated interview with Balqis, 2018-04-18)

The extract suggests that Balqis believed it is essential to learn how to interact in society. She also believed that their teacher plays a crucial role in guiding the students through these new practices and discourses, acting as a literacy broker who bridges the ideologies of society with the understanding and learning of the students. This view was echoed by other students, who emphasized the importance of learning new ways of speaking to communicate with others without embarrassing themselves. They also stressed the need to learn more than just interpersonal skills; for instance, having the information necessary to talk to a doctor. Fuad explained that this was the first time in his life that he had learned about such topics:

> Fuad: I think it's important when we learn things like the topics we're going through now

about sex and relationships, just like we learn the rest of the body.

Anna: I see, that's true. It's natural in a way. Did you learn anything about the body in Somalia?

Fuad: No.

Anna: So, this is actually the first time someone has told you about it?

Fuad: Yes, it is only Elisabeth who has taught us about this. (Translated interview with Fuad, 2018-03-12)

During the interviews, the other students also affirmed that this was their first exposure to such topics. Even if they had encountered information previously in their country of origin, it often originated from less informed sources: "Teachers themselves cannot say 'colon' or 'liver'. They know nothing" (Translated interview with Zubeyr, 2018-03-12). All of the students agreed that it is essential to gain knowledge of various subjects, even if the conversations are difficult to have. However, one of the students, Maram, expressed her disapproval of the teacher's discussion of same-sex relationships, particularly between males, although she does believe that it is beneficial to learn about the body and heterosexual relations.

7 Discussion and conclusion

This article has sought to investigate Brandt's (2015) concept of literacy sponsorship by exploring how a group of adolescent students with limited experience of school-based learning described their teacher Elisabeth's role as a mediator to literacy practices, or a *literacy broker*. Specifically, investigations were conducted to uncover how the students felt Elisabeth enabled them to engage in literacy practices, as well as their views on how certain practices were valued while others were devalued. Several other literacy sponsors, or brokers, may have had an impact on the students' development of literacy, such as friends and relatives, both within and outside of school (cf. Wedin, 2015), religious leaders (cf. Van Duinen, 2017), the language tutor, and other teachers. However, the present study focused on the students' literacy practices and one teacher's instruction within the school setting. Conducting translated interviews with students can present challenges, but it is important to highlight the perspectives of students with few prior experiences of formal schooling, since they are frequently marginalized and overlooked in research (Young-Scholten, 2015).

My findings suggest that the students recognize that the teacher supported their engagement in literacy practices not only through writing and reading in the traditional sense, but also through a variety of interactive modes, including body language, as well as through examinations, dictations, the teacher's follow-up approaches, and her strict demands combined with genuine care. The findings from the larger ethnographic case study that this article departs from indicate that the teacher seems to value particular practices before others (Winlund, 2019, 2021, 2022). The observations showed that Elisabeth often decided which literacy practices and discourses were permitted and encouraged, or conversely, discouraged in the classroom (cf. Kramsch, 2009). Hence, besides facilitating access to specific content, she functioned as a gatekeeper (Nocon & Cole, 2009), drawing on her extensive teaching experience to determine what topics were suitable for discussion in the class. It appears that the students' influence on the comprehension of literacy and teaching practices is limited, as indicated in other research (cf. Wedin, 2021). Their voices are even occasionally muted, as evidenced by their inability to express negative views on same-sex relationships (cf. Winlund, 2019). Thus, there is not much room for the students to express themselves differently, although this can also be explained by the fact that their possibilities to interact in Swedish is yet limited and that they are new to this society and to school. The interview responses of the students indicate that they accept this dynamic, placing trust in their teacher's judgment regarding what is in

their best interest, to be able to progress in the Swedish school system and to fit into a society that is new to them – to dance the dance (Gee, 2015). The students emphasized that the teacher's role extends beyond merely instructing them on meeting school expectations; rather, the teacher aids in their advancement within the educational system, especially given that many of them have no prior school experience. Their trust is rooted in the visible encouragement and genuine care the teacher shows, cultivating a relationship marked by mutual respect and affection. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that students' opportunities to freely express their opinions about the teacher's instruction in the interviews might be restricted. This limitation stems from her dual role as a school representative, influencing their academic evaluations, and as a representative of the mainstream society. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, students may be uncertain about my role as an interviewer, which could create ambiguity regarding whether I am associated with the school personnel or representational of authorities.

Nonetheless, this dynamic prompts inquiries into the responsibilities of teachers. While students appeared to accept the teacher's role as a literacy broker, guiding them through crucial literacy practices and discourses, it is noteworthy that their youth and newcomer status might enhance their reliance on and inclination to trust their teacher for guidance in navigating societal norms. This places a heightened demand on the teacher to exercise great care in prioritizing practices, consistently keeping the purpose of priorities in mind, while ensuring that the students feel respected and valued (cf. Nocon & Cole, 2009). Engaging in a discussion with students about the reasoning behind teachers' choices can pose challenges when there is a language barrier. However, this challenge could be eased by including language tutors (cf. Eek, 2023) to add nuance to the conversation and assist students in expressing their opinions. However, the students did not emphasize the importance of having a tutor who speaks their L1, while the translanguaging practices in the classroom appear to support their literacy development (cf. Canagarajah, 2013; Norlund Shaswar & Wedin, 2019). One possible explanation for this could be that the students do not realize that this is an important resource that helps them get access to new content, not least since this resource is only scheduled for two hours per week. Another explanation could be that the language tutor was engaged as an interpreter during these interviews, which might have hindered the students from speaking freely. Moreover, I did not explicitly ask them about the language tutors' helpfulness since my focus was on the teacher's role as a literacy broker. Thus, the choice of the students' language tutor as translator might have had an influence on the results of this study. However, the students' familiarity with the tutor and their apparent trust in him might have reinforced their confidence in responding to challenging questions, in contrast to a scenario where an unfamiliar interpreter was involved.

The notion of a "literacy sponsor" (Brandt, 1998) appears distinct from the ideas of a "literacy broker" or a "literacy mediator" (cf. Wedin, 2015). While a literacy mediator seems to be a neutral figure facilitating literacy, such as reading for someone unable to read independently, the terms *sponsors* and *brokers* carry ideological implications. Brandt (1998) argued that teachers differ from other types of literacy sponsors in that they do not directly exploit students' adoption of specific literacy practices for personal gain. However, while the terms "literacy sponsor" and "literacy broker" may initially appear distinct, it becomes challenging to separate them in the context of this school setting and the exploration of teacher's roles in shaping literacy practices. It is crucial to recognize that the school curriculum, including its content, is inherently ideological (Apple, 2018). Teachers represent the school, whose practices students are expected to follow, as indicated when the teacher insisted on certain practices and discourses to align with the curriculum. Also, individual teachers may derive benefits from emphasizing what they perceive as correct and essential practices. For instance, teachers may find their work environment more favorable when students adhere to expected school practices. Moreover, teachers might have personal motives for endorsing specific behaviors that align

with their vision of an accomplished student, to help the students continue in the school system, or as learners and young individuals in an unfamiliar society. Regardless of the teacher's motivations, instructional strategies should strive to establish a trustworthy and supportive environment that promotes the growth of students, both in linguistic skills and in the development of their identity as learners and young individuals in an unfamiliar society. This emerges as a crucial aspect of literacy, highlighting a key role for a literacy broker.

Acknowledgement

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