Additive Language Pedagogy:  
Aligning a Learner-Centered Approach with Student Diversity

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ABSTRACT

One of the strongholds of the philosophy of education in Danish primary schools is to build learning activities on students’ resources and knowledge base. This calls for a differentiated approach to learning in classrooms characterized by increased linguistic and cultural diversity. However, for students with language minority background this general principle is often superseded by a focus on homogenization and silencing of diversity. This article is based on Cummins’ distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism, and it introduces the concept of additive language pedagogy and discusses how this can be developed as part of the teachers’ instructional practices in plurilingual settings.

KEYWORDS

Additive Pedagogy, Danish Primary Schools, Language Minority Students, Learner-Centered Activities, Student Diversity

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the proportion of students with language and ethnic minority background has doubled in Danish schools. Today, they make up around 11% of all students in Danish primary and lower secondary schools and in private as well as public schools. Since the turn of the century, there has been a growing concern for these students’ school achievement based on their performance in school-leaving exams and their participation in and drop-out rates from secondary education (Saarup et al., 2004; Danmarks Evalueringstitut, 2007; Nusche et al., 2010; Danmarks Statistik, 2014). Data from the tri-annual Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which Denmark has taken part in since 2000, and, in particular, data from the exclusively Danish focus on differences in test results between majority and minority students reported as PISA ETHNIC (Christensen et al., 2014) have added to the concern¹. As a result, The Danish Ministry of Education has launched a number of initiatives to support minority students’ learning outcomes through preschool activities and in-service training of teachers (reported in Andersen & Rangvid, 2015).

The school discourse across wide parts of the Danish political spectrum refers to school problems connected to students’ minority backgrounds, but also that the Ministry and local municipalities have developed appropriate measures which will eventually produce better school results. However, seen from a more critical perspective, the situation is far more complex than identifying a problem with a matching solution. The concern about minority students’ school achievement is voiced at the same time as a wider agenda of inclusion is introduced into Danish schools. This has closed down not only reception classes and other support programs for newcomers, but also special education in

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general, and mainstreamed the students, irrespective of their present learning potential. At the same
time school hours have been extended, and school schedules have been replaced by student plans with
clear objectives. Thus important structural and ideological changes are transforming the concept of
schools in Denmark, leaving the responsibility for including different student groups to the teachers’
professional competence.

Many teachers who had specialized in minority students, have been placed in other teaching
functions, and there is very little focus on the special language issues connected to teaching and
learning of minority students (Kristjansdóttir & Timm, 2007). Compared to ten years ago, Danish as a
second language has lost most of its status in schools as well as in teacher training, and extracurricular
teaching in the students’ mother tongue has been reduced (Holmen, 2008). Issues of multicultural
education have been introduced into the guidelines for foreign languages (English, German and
French), which have also strengthened their position through an earlier starting age. However, similar
issues connected to majority-minority relations have been removed from the school curriculum and are
no longer in the focus of school development (Horst, 2017).

Thus, many minority students find themselves in a school setting which does not help them build
on their previous knowledge and experience when taking part in learning activities. In the terminology
of Jim Cummins (2000), they are placed in a subtractive rather than an additive learning situation. This
is a pattern often found with minority students across the globe (Adams & Kirova, 2006). However,
seen from a local Danish perspective the subtractive learning situation seems to clash with a widespread
ideology of schooling being learner-centered and individualized (De Conick-Smith et al., 2015). This
apparent clash is even more remarkable within the teaching of foreign languages because these are
generally informed by a resource perspective on students’ linguistic background. The mismatch is the
motivation behind the present article, which will first comment on the general student-centeredness
of Danish schooling and then develop the theme further by looking specifically at foreign language
teaching in Danish schools, including the role which students’ language resources are ascribed here.
The article ends by proposing a focus on additive pedagogy for all students.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION WITHIN DANISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

To understand why a student-centered approach has become a core value in the Danish mindset on
primary education, a brief introduction to the history of Danish schools is necessary (see de Conick-
Smith et al., 2015, for an extended version). The Danish public school called the “Folkeskole”
(literally, “school for the people” of Denmark) was established by law in 1814. Before that education
was for selected groups and often privately organized, either linked to Christian institutions or to the
interests of the growing middle class in the cities. An important focus was to be able to read Luther’s
catechism as a prerequisite for confirmation. From 1814, children in agricultural areas as well as
children in urban working-class areas were included in schooling activities, and all children were given
the right to seven years of education. During the 19th century schools focused on religion, reading,
writing, and arithmetic – subject areas which both included basic skills, but also the anchoring of the
population to nation building. Danish was the only medium of instruction replacing the earlier use of
Latin and Greek. For a period of time, the school subject which has later been referred to as Danish
(language and literature) was called Mother Tongue, and after initial literacy training, texts focusing
on key events in national history were used as reading material. After 1903, a process of curricular
and structural homogenization took place paving the way for the comprehensive school - with 10
years of mandatory education for all children - which we see today.

Inspired by international reform movements - but also by a Danish variant of progressive
pedagogy, which grew in strength after World War II (Nørgaard, 2005) - this organizational process
was supplemented by a new philosophy of education which did not only focus on uniform conditions
for schools across the country, but also on installing a broad and integrated development of children
as the core task. Besides a focus on skills and analytic competences, this included a focus on
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