

Function and Use of Literary Texts in Nordic Schools

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Literature instruction is traditionally considered an essential domain of L1 education all over the world. Yet, as adolescents' interest in reading decreases (Schleicher, 2019), and as reading research increasingly emphasizes disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012) and the reading of informational texts (Alsup, 2015), it is of vital importance to investigate the instructional practices of literature in schools.

Nordic research on literature instruction predominantly consists of small-scaled classroom studies with few comparative attempts. Thus, we have only limited knowledge of the function and use of literature that characterizes instructional practices in the different countries. Yet the social, linguistic, and educational commonalities of the Nordic countries (Klette, 2018) makes it an interesting test bed for precisely such cross-country comparisons of educational practices.

In this study, the function and use of literary texts in Nordic lower secondary school is investigated by means of video-analysis, qualitative coding, and statistical comparisons. The study draws on a large data set, including video recordings, photos, and examples of student work, from 40 L1 lessons in each of the five countries. Video-analysis is conducted using an observational protocol that focuses on central features of instruction, e.g., the use of texts, intellectual challenge of tasks and activities, and teachers' instructional scaffolding.

The analysis is presently in progress. Preliminary results, drawn from data in two of the five countries, however, indicate a number of striking commonalities in the way reading material is selected and used in classroom instruction. At the same time, the analyses also seem to suggest that there are some interesting differences related to teachers' way of orchestrating discussions of literature, in the way they respond to student interpretations, and what aspects of the texts they choose to highlight in classroom activities.

(Abstract 285 words)

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Traditionally, literature instruction has been a natural and important part of language arts education all over the world, and literature is considered important for young people's personal and intellectual development (Martinsson, 2018). Although it can be questioned whether literature really possesses immanent positive qualities (Persson, 2012), it is highly valued. Nevertheless, adolescents' interest in reading decreases (Schleicher, 2019), and there is a growing concern about the fact that the level of reading comprehension is deteriorating in many Western countries.

When young people read less on a voluntary basis, it is important that they meet interesting and challenging texts in school, and it is indispensable that they develop their reading and reading comprehension to meet the demands of the modern society. It is important that students meet factual as well as literary texts in school, but since reading research often emphasizes disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012) and the reading of informational texts (Alsup, 2015), it is highly relevant to investigate the instructional practices of literature in schools.

Aim and research questions

In a Nordic context, previous research within the educational field has been dominated by small-scale studies based on different methodological and theoretical approaches. Although these studies have contributed with useful information about what actually goes on in Nordic classrooms, it has been difficult to compare these studies to each other (Klette, Blikstad-Balas & Roe, 2017). Therefore, this comparative study, which relies on a large number of video recordings from language arts lessons in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland, will provide a new perspective on literary instruction in Nordic countries.

The aim of the study is to describe what characterizes literature instruction in Nordic lower secondary school regarding aspects such as the use of literary text, and the quality of classroom discourse about these text. In the analysis, instruction and use of strategies, as well as intellectual challenges of activities that students engage in when processing literary texts, are also taken into consideration. The study addresses the following research questions:

- What characterizes literature instruction in Nordic lower secondary schools?
- What are the major differences and similarities between Nordic countries when it comes to literature instruction?

Previous research

According to previous research, many Scandinavian teachers meet students who are not used to reading advanced texts, and who are not interested in literature (Penne, 2012). Therefore these teachers often choose literary texts that present situations where students can recognize themselves and their own lives. They also endeavour to create positive experiences through reading (Penne, 2012). During lessons dedicated to reading and processing authentic texts, Swedish students are seldom presented with assignment that require deeper analysis and that challenge their thinking (Tengberg, 2019).

There are different ways in which literature instruction can help students improve their understanding and interpretation of texts. For instance, classrooms discussions about texts can be beneficial. In high-quality discussions students interact and share their opinions, and

authentic questions, as well as the teacher's uptake, can help them explicate their ideas (Soter et al., 2008). However, increases in student talk do not automatically enhance students' comprehension, critical thinking and reasoning (Murphy et al., 2009).

The use of various strategies can also help student develop their reading comprehension. During the last decade, Norwegian teachers' repertoire of reading comprehension strategies have increased, but occurrences of explicit reading comprehension strategy instruction is still limited (Magnusson, Roe, & Blikstad-Balas, 2018).

Methods

When data for the study was collected, approximately 40 language arts lessons from each of the four countries were video recorded. Two cameras and two different microphones were used. One of them captured the teacher, whereas the other one captured what was going on in the class. Apart from videos, the data set also includes photos and examples of students' work. It was important that the sampling should be large enough, but also that it was representative. Therefore things such as urban-rural setting, public-private, socio-economic status, and students' academic achievement were considered when schools were sampled.

When analysing the video data, certified raters used a special protocol, the Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observation (PLATO). This protocol was developed to capture aspects of teachers' instruction that are considered important for students' learning. It is based on the existing literature on effective instruction in language arts (Grossman, 2015). Twelve different elements, which can be sorted into four dimensions (instructional scaffolding, disciplinary demand, representation and use of content, and classroom environment), are scored on a 4-point scale. This makes it possible to evaluate the quality of classroom instruction, but also to make comparisons between classrooms and countries.

In this study there is a focus on elements that can be connected to literary discussion, namely text-based instruction, classroom discourse, intellectual challenge, modelling, and strategy use and instruction. Since the raters also noted what students work with during the lessons, only lessons in which classes read and/or work with literature are included in the next step of the analysis. In order to draw conclusion from the data, statistical analyses based on the PLATO-coding are performed.

Conclusions

So far the analysis has only just begun, but preliminary results from two of the countries indicate that, when it comes to literary instruction, there are a number of important similarities across nations. For instance, literary texts are frequently used in language arts instruction. When these texts are discussed, teachers quite often dominate the classroom discourse, and generally only a limited number of students take part in the discussion. Even though reading strategies are considered important, teachers seldom provide explicit and detailed instruction about strategies.

(Extended abstract 927 words)

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