The Role of Aesthetics in Swedish Literature Studies: A Survey beyond Measurability of the Teaching of Literature

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ABSTRACT
Organizational frameworks in Swedish schools have resulted in instrumentality and measurability. To literature studies, this has led to a focus on comprehension and proficiency at the expense of aesthetic aspects of fiction-reading. This study examines how teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools relate the aesthetic experience to literature studies. Data was collected using an online questionnaire, answered by 22 teachers. The findings suggest that participants are aware of and include the aesthetic aspects of fiction-reading, while at the same time prioritizing instrumental goals, such as language development and reading comprehension.

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1. Introduction
Findings show negative global trends regarding students’ reading habits (National Endowment for the Arts, 2016; Skaar et al., 2018; Walia & Sinha, 2014; Wilson & Casey, 2007). The decline is suggested to be distinct and consistent over time (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson, 2006; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Tveit, 2012), a development that includes both students and pre-service teachers (Kennedy, 2014; Petersson, 2009). This is supported by Wicklund et al. (2016) in their examination of pre-service teachers’ experience in fiction-reading. One way of understanding students’ reading habits and, moreover, how they may be viewed in the light of literature studies, is to examine how literature is taught. Therefore, I conducted a questionnaire survey that was sent to first language (L1) teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools.

To say that classroom instruction is the sole factor that shapes students’ engagement with literature would be disregarding the complexity of teaching and learning. Bauerlein (2010), for instance, explains the decline with new habits among potential readers, as a result of the introduction of digital media. This displacement hypothesis – that is, the idea that old media are replaced by new ones as people begin to adopt the latter and change their media consumption habits – challenges earlier findings (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson, 2006) that suggest that the reasons to why some adolescents never read fiction is their home environment and the overall attitudes toward reading fiction in the surrounding society. Other suggested contributory causes are the lack of interest and desire to read, and a growing sense of difficulty to engage in books (Birkerts, 2004). Thus, the answer to the negative development why students’ reading habits may be sought in a range of factors, of which this study aims to examine the part represented by L1 teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools. In a study by Wintersparv et al. (2019) the results suggested that monitoring of students was central to teachers’ didactic decision, that there was a hierarchy among both teachers and students with regard...
to the modality of the text, that instrumentality characteristic of literature studies, that the teaching of literary devices was a norm among the participants, and that literature studies was sometimes made a means to ends in other school subjects. Drawing from these results, I wanted to investigate the teachers’ intentions and their aim in teaching literature, as well as their approaches. In addition, and as a contrast to the instrumental and the tangible, I wanted to examine the aesthetic aspects of literature studies – drawing from Dewey’s and Felski’s ideas – and focus on the Reading Experience – that is, the occurrence “which conceptualizes thoughts, feelings, and reactions the reader experiences during reading” (Wintersparv et al., 2019, p. 2). Furthermore, for contextualization, it is essential to connect the results to teaching objectives and approaches. Finally, since the Reading Experience is manifest on an individual level, the way teachers operationalize differentiated classroom instructions may be helpful for a broader understanding.

The four overarching research questions are presented below. For an overview of specific questionnaire items under respective research question, see Table 1.

1. How do teachers relate the Reading Experience to literature studies?
2. What role do teaching objectives play in literature studies?
3. What teaching approaches are represented in literature studies?
4. How do teachers use differentiated instructions in literature studies to adapt to individual students?

In the following, I present the current state of literature studies in Swedish L1 education, in which measurability and instrumentality are central (Linnér, 1984; Lundström et al., 2011; Öhman, 2015). I will contrast existing conditions with ideas about how the artistic and the scholarly is being sharply separated (Dewey, 1934/2005). According to Dewey, students’ educational development is achieved by continuous stream of experiences, related to reflection and emotions. Thus, the scholarly needs an artistic-experiential supplement to form holistic learning processes. I will then present Felski’s (2008) concepts from Uses of Literature, which may pose as an implementation of Dewey’s ideas regarding fiction-reading. By relating the two, I aim to contextualize this study with the aesthetic experience as crucial to literature studies as measurability. The aesthetics is compatible with measurable aspects of literature studies – however, the question is what role it plays when these measurable aspects are the main focus.

Table 1: Questionnaire items.

| Item number | Question |
|-------------|----------|
| Introductory questions | |
| Q1 | Please describe how the nature of teaching literature has changed during the past 5–10 years. |
| Q2 | What are the biggest challenges in teaching literature today? |
| The Reading Experience | |
| Q3 | How do you define the Reading (or Literary) Experience? |
| Q4 | Why do you or why do you not involve the Reading Experience in your teaching of literature? |
| Q5 | If you do involve the Reading Experience in your teaching of literature, how do you do it? |
| Aims with Teaching Literature | |
| Q6 | What are your aims with teaching literature as a part of your English class? |
| Q7 | How is the literary work chosen in relation to the aim/s? |
| Q8 | How is the literary work chosen in relation to the aim/s? |
| Models and Approaches | |
| Q9 | How do you address the aspects of literature that you find interesting when teaching it? |
| Q10 | Please give example of activities before, during, and after reading, and for what reading approach they are applied. |
| Q11 | How do you contextualize literature or and with students? |
| Differentiation of Teaching | |
| Q12 | In what parts or phases of teaching do you prefer a teacher-centered approach? |
| Q13 | What do you differentiate in your teaching when students have individual needs and conditions? |
| Q14 | Can you give examples of how you implement differentiation in your teaching? |
2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Education in a Neoliberal Reform Era

The instrumentality that is currently central to the Swedish literary classroom is characteristic of neoliberalism (Mehrstam, 2010), according to which education should support the global market by providing with future workers and consumers (Andreotti & Pashby, 2013). Thus, the reform of upper secondary education that was introduced in 2009 emphasized employability and stakeholder influence, which is representative of the current approach (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). The development toward neoliberalism is, however, not restricted to Sweden, but can be viewed on a global scale. For instance, England has experienced market mechanisms and extensive involvement of private actors in schools, blurring the lines between public and private (Beach & Dove-mark, 2011; Junemann & Ball, 2013; West, 2014). Similarly, in Canada, central administrators of the education system are less concerned with supporting collegial networks and constructivist learning processes, and more concerned with identifying desired outcomes and monitoring students’ performance, ensuring accountability. Furthermore, this occidental approach to education has spread to the Global South through incentives to receive economic aid from agencies such as the World Bank, the IMF, and UNESCO (Ball et al., 2003; Levidow, 2002).

In Sweden, the neoliberal shift from the collective to the individual started during the 1970s and 1980s (Malmström, 2017) and was concluded with the policies of the Conservative government in 1991 (Lindström & Beach, 2015; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2010; Wahlström, 2014). It resulted in a dismantling of society-oriented political organization with welfare systems structured to serve the population, causing changes to the regulation of education (Alexiadou et al., 2016; Biesta, 2010). Rather than the construction of citizenship and a democratic society, focus during the 1990s was turned to freedom of choice and decentralized variation in a marketized school system (Alexiadou et al., 2016). The shift further lead to supervisory and quality assessment, more frequent national tests, and a new School Inspectorate (Wahlström, 2014) in what Power (2003) calls the audit-society. In this neoliberal landscape – which in many aspects counters the discourses of inclusion and equity (Burke, 2012; Gale, 2011; Gale & Tranter, 2011) replacing it with discourses of utility (Ball et al., 2012) – the view of fiction as knowledge with intrinsic values have gradually changed to adapt to the instrumental (Degerman, 2012). It is with these developments as a backdrop that literature studies in Sweden need to be viewed.

2.2. Literature Studies in Sweden

The Swedish national subject syllabus for L1 Swedish in upper secondary education (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012) stipulates that fiction be taught. The requirements cover aspects from fiction representing male and female authors and reflecting different periods and cultures, to focus on literary devices, narrative techniques, and literary history. Subject syllabi further declare that fiction-reading should promote self-awareness and understanding.

In Swedish schools, literature studies have become focused on instrumental components such as comprehension and proficiency (Ewald, 2007; Johansson, 2014) – in line with requisites of neoliberal educational reforms. Ewald (2007) concludes that Swedish studies are assigned the main role in the students’ language development. This movement from aesthetic elements might result in students’ disinclination for reading (Schiefele et al., 2012), which would, then, create a negative correlation between literature studies and students’ general reading habits. The departure from the aesthetics of reading is due to organizational frameworks (Linnér, 1984), for instance the curricular view of fiction. Swedish curricula rarely treat fiction as a subject with intrinsic values, but mainly regard it as a means to other ends, such as language learning, critical thinking, and the forming of a cultural identity (Öhman, 2015). This utilitarian focus is discussed by Lundström et al. (2011) as reducing the incentives to read fiction, which further connects literature studies in school...
and students’ general reading habits. In addition, Lundström et al. (2011) assert that the curriculum promotes measurability, causing additional elements of instrumentality in literature studies together with the orientation around literary genres and literary history.

The development toward instrumentality and measurability is accompanied by ideology critique at the expense of aesthetics (Miller, 2002), which resembles Weber’s (1958) claim that scholarly progress has removed the sense of sacredness and ultimate meaning. The instrumental teaching approach is supported by results from a recent study on literature studies (Wintersparv et al., 2019). The study formed the first part of a larger project, in which the current survey aims to further explore the findings, which support those from other Swedish surveys (Ewald, 2007; Johansson, 2014; Lundström et al., 2011), representing a reading mode far from one involving the aesthetics and the Reading Experience, which, De-Malach and Poyas (2018) maintain, is a dominant criterion for a text’s appropriateness for teaching. If the way in which curricular stipulations are phrased results in a possibly negative correlation between literature studies and students’ interest in written fiction and their inclination to engage in reading, it is crucial to examine how teachers operationalize their teaching of literature within the curricular framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

In the following, I will present the ideas of Dewey (Dewey, 1934/2005) and Felski (Felski, 2008) about the aesthetic and experiential aspects of art. With the examples from Dewey, I want to illustrate the possible weaknesses with how current Swedish literature studies are organized. Using Felski’s different modes of textual engagement, I want to show how the Reading Experience may be a helpful supplement to form a whole for student readers in their encounter with fiction.

3.1. Dewey and the Aesthetic Experience

One of the distinctive features of art is its ability to communicate ideas – an ability compared to that found in language (Dewey, 1934/2005; Langer, 1957). According to Dewey, the communication is not merely between the piece of art and the audience, but rather, he underlines how experiences build on both earlier and later ones. Thus, he extends communication to an intra- and intertextual on a reader-level, emphasizing the holistic character of the aesthetic experience (Goldman, 1995) and creating a unified and complete reading. This concept of whole was later expanded by Beardsley et al. (1982), as a criterion for the aesthetic experience.

3.1.1. The Compartmentalization of Art

Dewey (1934/2005) critiques compartmentalization of art into high and low. While the former strives to maintain exclusivity, the latter takes an inclusive approach to fiction (Persson, 2000). The remedy is to merge the antitheses (Dewey, 1934/2005) by eliminating gaps, perfunctory junctions, and lifeless centers, as we facilitate an experience. The italicization indicates Dewey’s distinction between experience and an experience. The latter, he claims, is not attained until it has reached its conclusion or fulfillment. If one element replaces another in a succession without absorption or forwarding, there can merely be experience, not an experience. Moreover, the quality of the experience can be measured by the amount of reflection and emotions involved, distinguishing experience from an experience (Dewey, 1934/2005).

3.1.2. The Text as a Whole

To achieve an experience, we need to tend to the before and after, as well as intercomponental relations, which parallels Kant’s (1790/1987) idea that aesthetic value may be found in interrelations among art properties. Without this whole we may consider one property dominant, letting it characterize the entire experience (Dewey, 1934/2005). Thus, when reading excerpts, readers need to be aware that any property might be given an unproportionally dominant role and lead
to iniquitous conclusions about the whole. In addition, readers need to take into consideration the role of the preceding and/or following part of the text and how their perception of the excerpt might be affected by it.

Furthermore, readers bring biographical elements to the aesthetic experience (Michael et al., 2018) – what Dewey (1934/2005) calls apprenticeship. Excerpts not only impedes contextualization of text properties, but readers’ biographical elements do not have a whole with which to resonate. Thus, readers are prevented from being active in their reading, an aspect similar to what Dewey (1899) advocates guides progressive education, and an essential prerequisite for the aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934/2005; Karlsen et al., 2019).

3.1.3. The Aesthetic Experience
The distinguishing feature of an aesthetic experience is the integration of self and object (Dewey, 1934/2005). This creates alternative worlds of complete and fulfilling engagement, Goldman (1995) claims, connecting Dewey with Kant (1790/1987), who maintained that pleasures of aesthetic experience derive from engagement.

From the perspective of literature studies, it is crucial to understand the impact of aesthetic values upon literature studies. How do teachers approach the whole to create an experience in an educational environment that sanctions excerpts? To what extent do instructional activities need to be student-centered for biographical elements to be beneficial?

3.2. Felski and the Affective Modes of Textual Engagement
Fiction-reading is more than simply analytical decoding (Felski, 2015). In direct colloquy with Dewey’s (1934/2005) emphasis on the role of passion and biographical elements in reading, she argues that textual details reverberate when in contact with readers’ passions, histories, and memories. She proposes, as does Macé (2013), that reading is an event of becoming. And in congruence with Dewey, she embraces the holistic approach, involving both head and heart (Römhild, 2019), and suggests the following modes of textual engagement.

3.2.1. Recognition
The first mode Felski (2008) explores is recognition, referring to both cultural history and casual conversation when declaring that recognition is a “common event” (p. 26) while reading and, thus, influential in motivating us to read. It is also a means to understand what other branches of literary criticism engage in (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Another aspect of recognition is identification – how reading may offer comfort that readers cannot find outside the realm of fiction. Having one’s thoughts and feelings reflected by the fictional, she maintains, confirms our affinity and grants acknowledgement. The Reading Experience, then, is prompted by representation, which enables both an alignment and an allegiance with a character (Felski, 2008). Thus, the Reading Experience has an identificatory function that offers readers voice and to be recognized.

3.2.2. Enchantment
Following recognition Felski (2008) turns to enchantment, noting that it is characterized by a sense of being absorbed by an aesthetic object. This dichotomized view of fiction-reading, with one formalistic mode of reading and another, sensory one, is present in the discourse of literary research (Blau, 2003). Others, for instance Boone (1998), regard close reading as a form of intoxication rather than detachment.

Another characteristic of literary enchantment is the feeling of discomfort caused by transition back to a reality. The analytical aspects become secondary, and the distinction between self and text seizes to exist. This, Felski (2008) argues, prevents us from contextualizing the text, because the text has become the context.
For enchantment to be a plausible concept, it needs to be relevant to the contemporary (Felski, 2008). Consequently, when measurability determines teaching, the Reading Experience needs to be relatable to curricular requirements to be justified. One way of doing so is via enchantment, since one of the reasons why we turn to fiction is to be immersed (Felski, 2008). Enchantment, as a part of the Reading Experience, would, thus, stimulate students’ interest in fiction-reading.

3.2.3. Knowledge
Introducing knowledge as the third mode of textual engagement, Felski’s (2008) reconnects with what she suggested when she discussed recognition – that is, how we link what we read to what we know. Here, Felski refers to Ricoeur (1984) when she considers how our experience of the world is entrenched in our practices and competences. Thus, reality, with the support from which we interpret literary texts, is a construct of, among other things, literary texts. In other words, our Reading Experience depends reciprocally on what we know.

3.2.4. Shock
Finally, with shock, Felski (2008) transitions from the intellectual and emotional to the corporal and directs attention to the embodied reading that builds on a sense of fear, disgust, and repulsion, causing our body to respond to the text sooner than our mind does. Focus is rather on the qualitative impact of a text on the reader’s psyche than on how a certain affective state is manifested. It conveys an instantaneous and jarring reaction to the painful and horrifying.

Thus, shock may be said to be the opposite of the harmonious pleasure of enchantment. Felski compares it to being ambushed and under assault by the text, triggering somatic reactions, which are founded in bodily experiences and imposed upon the reader through the author’s language (Fatheddine, 2019).

4. Data Sources
4.1. The Questionnaire
Since the geographical range was initially unclear, I safeguarded with a method that allows a large geographic area (Berdie & Anderson, 1974) by choosing the questionnaire – and, in addition, enhanced that quality with online distribution. It is, furthermore, beneficial for closed populations such as members of a professional association (Sue & Ritter, 2007). The questionnaire was distributed online.

One advantage of using questionnaires in qualitative research is that they allow participants to complete the questions at their own discretion (Berdie et al., 1986; Tourangeau et al., 2013), which could possibly optimize the number of respondents. Another aspect of questionnaires in qualitative research is the relative efficiency for researchers when posing questions about which group members may be assumed to be familiar (Gibson & Hawkins, 1968). Combined with the aptness of self-complete formats for participants who are experienced in reading and writing (Berdie et al., 1986), a questionnaire regarding literature studies constructed for teachers in a qualitative study should be productive.

To allow respondents to give answers using their own words, and to stimulate unanticipated answers, learning about the topic as respondents genuinely see it, rather than how the questioner does (Campbell, 1945; Fink, 2003b), I used open-ended questions. The three questionnaire items concerning the Reading Experience had their starting point in what, why, and how – without assuming that this was a part of the participants’ practice. The second set of questionnaire items, concerning the participants’ aims, was constructed to examine the participants’ intentions, how the intentions were transferred to the selection of texts, and how they were followed up. The questionnaire items focusing on teaching models and approaches were phrased to focus on the operationalization of literature studies. Finally, the questionnaire items oriented toward the differentiation of teaching investigated when and how the participants applied differentiated classroom instructions. In addition to the overarching research questions, a set of short, opening
questions was incorporated to set the tone for and lead the respondent into the main part of the questionnaire (Payne, 1951; Sue & Ritter, 2007).

Attempting to attain the most effective questions, I constructed them to maximize understanding, using language that is familiar and appropriate to the respondents (Berdie et al., 1986; Fink, 2003a). I avoided loaded questions that would encourage or discourage a certain response. Moreover, to make questions more specific, I avoided forcing the respondent to express an opinion on a topic to which they had not previously had one (Payne, 1951).

After compiling the questionnaire items, they were examined to ensure reliability and validity, to certify that they stimulate relevant data (Berdie et al., 1986; Sue & Ritter, 2007). Furthermore, I revised some questionnaire items to eliminate ambiguities. Additionally, a pre-test was employed to check for inconsistencies and gaps in language and content that would reduce the efficiency of the questionnaire.

After pre-testing, the 14 questionnaire items were revised according to received feedback and arranged, starting with the general and proceeding to the specific (see Table 1). Finally, after constructing the online questionnaire in the survey platform, a pilot test was conducted to ensure full functionality in the intended setting.

4.2. Participants and Procedure

Invitation emails were sent to principals of 96 upper secondary schools in 13 municipalities in the South of Sweden. The recipients were asked to forward the invitation to teachers who met the inclusion criteria for eligibility: (1) teachers in the L1 Swedish with (2) an interest in fiction and literature studies.

Since Swedish L1 teaching includes the study of both language and literature, the first criterion ensured subject knowledge. The second criterion aimed at reaching teachers who have given literature studies extra consideration, due to their personal interest and motivation, which is a key determinant of teaching effectiveness (Han & Yin, 2016). In addition to emailing schools, I posted the invitation in a public Facebook group for Swedish L1 teachers, as well as on Twitter.

The three recruitment channels generated 23 participants, of which 16 were female and seven were male, age 34–61, with teaching experience from one to 38 years. With one non-respondent, the number of participants was adjusted to 22, which is a relatively small sample. However, being a qualitative study, I do not aim for representative or generalizable results, but rather for depth and individual meaning to the topic (Fink, 2003b).

After agreeing to participate, participants were emailed a link to the online survey along with their personal code. With regard to the criticism that prodding participants may result in invalid answers (Berdie et al., 1986), I limited the reminders to two instances. To assure non-bias, the questionnaires were not looked at until after data collection was completed.

4.3. Ethical Aspects

This study was conducted in accordance with The Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (SFS 2003:460) and guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Personal data was processed in accordance with Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the European Council. Furthermore, ethics approval was obtained from the Regional Ethics Committee in Umeå (2017/54–31).

The participants were informed by email about the purpose of the study, risks and benefits of participation, activities that constitute participation, how data will be used, confidentiality, and voluntariness of their participation, including their right to withdraw from the study at any point for any reason without any negative consequences. This information was reiterated in the consent form, which was presented prior to the first page of the questionnaire and signed by the participants before turning to questionnaire items.
To retain anonymity, I asked participants to enter a personal code on the questionnaire. This unique identifier also prevented participants from entering multiple responses (Sue & Ritter, 2007). To ensure that neither participants nor the schools are identifiable, the data was kept de-identified throughout the analysis. I decided against full anonymity, since it would not allow me to follow up submitted questionnaires for further inquiries (Berdie et al., 1986). Data will be decoded only if further investigation is prompted, the key for which is stored on a flash drive and kept separate from the data itself (Table 2).

5. Analysis

The kind of open questions used in the questionnaire generate answers that need to be cataloged and interpreted (Fink, 2003b). To do so, I chose inductive eclectic coding to analyze collected data, generating codes that represented first-impression words and phrases (Saldaña, 2013), and reviewing data for unifying ideas.

The responses from the questionnaire were transferred to a spreadsheet and categorized using codes. Each questionnaire item generated their unique codes, but also ones overlapping with other questionnaire items.

The initial codes were revised, arranged, and supplemented with subcategories, to provide a comprehensive picture of the data set. Finally, codes were combined to form central themes (see Table 3), to which responses from the questionnaire and the research questions were related.

6. Findings

In the following, I present the results consisting of the five central themes. It should be noted that the results represent the participants’ own view. I am aware that there might be discrepancies between the questionnaire responses and what I would find during classroom observations. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that questionnaire responses reflect didactic intentions that form the basis of instructional activities.

6.1. The Student as Subject

The focus of this theme is the individual student and their prerequisites for reading. Responses that comprise the theme place students in the center, sometimes with agency, but always as

| Item number | Codes |
|-------------|-------|
| Q1          | Reading comprehension/habit, students’ interest in reading, quantity, reading together, subject syllabus |
| Q2          | Reading comprehension/habit, interest in reading, quantity, reading together, subject syllabus |
| Q3          | Other people, a fictive world, the reader’s feelings, identification |
| Q4          | Reading comprehension, sociocultural perspective, motivation, primary/important goal |
| Q5          | Students present, students discuss, teacher provides conditions, students reflect |
| Q6          | Literary history, students’ interest in reading, language development, identity/human conditions/perspectives, subject syllabus, reading proficiency, source of knowledge, writing proficiency, the Reading Experience |
| Q7          | Challenges, in accordance with purpose, students’ interest and reading proficiency, in accordance to subject syllabus, Bildung and language development |
| Q8          | Discussions, oral and written presentations, informal conversations |
| Q9          | Discussions, contextualization, the teacher as a role model for reading, the teacher’s comments on the text, student-centered strategy |
| Q10         | Reflection and discussion, contextualization, reading comprehension, literary analysis |
| Q11         | Themes, historic context, content context, students’ context |
| Q12         | Literary history, literary devices, initial phase of reading |
| Q13         | Modality, text, duration for reading, reading support, |
| Q14         | Modality, text, duration for reading, reading support, mode of presentation |
subjects. Under Q1 and Q2, responses that were classified as the current theme mentioned reading comprehension, reading habits, students’ interest in reading, and text quantity. The latter is not limited to the number of literary works read, but also includes the length of the texts. One participant wrote that “teachers choose simpler texts, hoping that the students will want to read them”.

Under Q4, four participants referred to the importance of students’ motivation and how the Reading Experience “increases the motivation for students to read, inspiring them to continue reading”. The responses under Q5 matching the theme highlighted the strategy to choose texts that align with students’ interests to optimize the Reading Experience. Under Q6, participants underlined the role of literature studies in awakening students’ interest in fiction-reading.

Regarding text selection in relation to teaching aims, four participants emphasized the challenging of students through fiction as a criterion. “The students need to read texts that challenge them, but it is perhaps more important that they read what makes them engaged and what gives them a Reading Experience” one participant answered. More commonly, participants mentioned students’ interests as well as reading proficiency as a key factor to their selection. This student-centered approach recurred in Q9, where teachers mentioned strategies to underline essential aspects of fiction, departing from students’ perspectives.

Finally, differentiated teaching is, by definition, applying a student-centered approach. The most commonly mentioned way of differentiating literature studies concerned modality and text selection: “It depends on what the needs and prerequisites are. Usually, the students get to listen to the texts.” Ten of the 22 participants responded that they adapt complexity and degree of difficulty of the text to students’ reading proficiency. Nine participants provide audiobooks to support students’ reading when needed. Moreover, the format of assessment was mentioned as an easily differentiated component.

### 6.2. Making Fiction Accessible

Under this theme, I have gathered responses tangent to teachers’ efforts to make fiction accessible. It could be argued that the theme in itself is a student-centered teaching strategy and thus belong to the previous theme. The code “choosing texts that align with students’ interest” can also be found under both themes – the determining factors to whether to organize a response under one or the other theme were (1) the purpose of tailoring a text, and (2) how a participant spoke about doing so. The ones who chose a text that aligned with students’ interests to enhance their Reading Experience were sorted under the previous theme, whereas the ones who viewed tailoring necessary to students reading at all, are found under the current one. This overlapping of themes and codes illustrates the complexity of teachers’ didactic reality, in which one aspect of teaching is not necessarily isolated to one category in a descriptive model.
To Q1, participants responded that they read aloud to students. One participant responded that they “read more frequently to the students these days”, while another engaged students in collective reading. Collective sharing was also turned to by the participant who shared their own Reading Experience for inspirational purposes. In working with the Reading Experience, participants deliberately choose texts that they believe will trigger the students to engage with the text. Another strategy that participants mentioned was asking questions and adapting assignments/examinations to let these inform the students’ post-reading process.

Finally, making fiction accessible was a recurrent theme when participants discussed differentiated instructions – partly when students needed more time to finish, partly in the degree of student support, for instance scaffolding content questions. “Students who need to can have a simplified version of the text” one participant wrote. “When I can, I usually offer an audiobook version, since some students would rather listen”

6.3. Curricular Goals and Literacy

On several instances, participants referred to curricular goals and/or literacy proficiency when answering the questions. One recurring remark was how curricular content has become so extensive, making it difficult to prioritize and cover everything during allotted time. “The large body of material that needs to be taught means that the students cannot fully penetrate one text before they need to continue with a new one” one participant responded. A number of participants discussed curricular content as something both transforming literature studies and challenging to their teaching. Three participants responded that the current subject syllabi offer less time for fiction-reading, the curricular position of which is shared with an increased amount of formal writing. One participant indicated that, as a direct result, instructional fiction-reading has decreased.

One major challenge, five participants specified, is instructional time, which they find too limited in relation to the stipulated content. One of them wrote: “As a teacher, one can have both good ambitions and plans with what is to be read and how one wants to work, but time, logistics, or the selection of literature can result in the work with literature being less pedagogical.” The outcome of this, the participants think, is that fiction is read more rarely, and when it is, less time is being given. One participant connected the sentiment expressed by the syllabi to a general lack of interest in fiction, pointing to the unconcern for fiction among colleagues as a challenge. “I think that the difficulties due to the curriculum and colleagues are larger than the ones I have with the students.”

Proficiency and comprehension were two qualities mentioned in connection to Q4. The Reading Experience was regarded by one participant as crucial to reading comprehension. Another participant regarded it as secondary: “It is a bonus. The most important is that the students are equipped with tools to become a better reader.” The proximity of literature studies to curricular content was the strongest in the responses to Q6. The majority of the responses could be derived from curricular stipulations and general literacy proficiency, which is not surprising, since the question targets the purpose of fiction as a part of instructional content. After all, the subject syllabus is the overarching legal document that stipulates teaching of a certain course, and thus the foundation of all instructional activities. To disregard the required core content would essentially be malpractice. Nonetheless, it is clear that aims mentioned by participants are matters that in the end need to be measured, assessed, and graded. Only one aspect beyond the formal goals, was mentioned – students’ interest in reading – even though one participant underlined that “it is a bonus” in addition to developing the students’ reading comprehension. However, when asked how literary works were selected in relation to teaching objectives, only five participants mentioned factors connecting to curricular content. Among these factors were classics, learning about and understanding society and life through literary history, and language development.

Language development and literature analysis were two factors matching the current theme, when participants discussed learning activities pre-, during, and post-reading. “Using fiction is simply the easiest and fastest way to achieve language improvements” one participant wrote. For
comprehension, participants include activities such as scaffolding content questions during reading. Focus on content is also present post-reading for assessment. Regarding activities focusing on literature analysis, those are introduced both pre-reading (to let students get acquainted with terminology and literary devices), during (to help students process their reading), and post-reading (for examinational purposes).

The question that generated most responses matching the current theme was about teacher-centeredness. The three codes that sprang from Q12 were literary history, literary devices, and the initial phase of a teaching unit, the latter of which was the most commonly occurring. From the responses, I conclude that the initial phase of a teaching unit often involves contextualizing and introduction of terminology and concepts. These concepts were specified by three of the participants as literary devices and analysis.

6.4. The Reading Experience

The notion of the Reading Experience was fairly established among the participants, whose definition of the concept could be sorted into four codes: the reader’s feelings, a fictional world, identification, and other people. The most common definition was a certain feeling that readers encounter during reading, which, according to two participants, also evokes thoughts and questions about textual subject matters. This thought-evoking fictional world, prompted by the Reading Experience, was another definition. “To read is to travel and share other people’s experiences and perspectives” one of the participants explained. “If the novel is good and captivating, you enter the universe of the book and forget your own for a while. That is a Reading Experience to me.” The third code is linked to the second one and may be reiterated as identification and how the reader relates to the fictional. Also related to the second and third code is the last one, how readers are introduced to other perspectives and worldviews than their own.

The second question about the Reading Experience showed that it plays a central part in literature studies and in accessing texts. Another code that appeared during the analysis was motivation—how participants use the Reading Experience to make fiction meaningful and reading interesting. Three participants emphasized the sociocultural aspect of learning: “If the students get to write about their reading and discuss with other students […] it contributes to a more intense Reading Experience.” Thus, they proposed, reading together and working with the same text is essential to optimize the Reading Experience and its effects.

On the utilitarian side, one participant viewed the Reading Experience as a means to improve reading comprehension, and another one regarded it as a non-essential bonus. Yet further from focusing on the Reading Experience were two participants who referred to curricular requirements of assessment and measurability and found the Reading Experience difficult to include. “Everything needs to be assessed. How do I assess the Reading Experience?” one of them asked.

The manners in which participants include the Reading Experience varied. The most frequent code was teacher-centered teaching, with participants applying different strategies to facilitate a Reading Experience for students, for instance by pairing the right text with the right student, or using scaffolding questions. The three other codes under Q5 all depart from a student’s perspective, where including the Reading Experience entails reflecting, discussing, and presenting.

6.5. The Sociocultural Perspective

A number of responses connected to a sociocultural perspective and how teachers and other students, in the capacity of social and cultural surrounding, affect how students understand fiction. In Q4 and Q5, the responses converge in the value of reading the same texts, to enable discussions during which students can enrich and develop each other’s reflections. One of the participants wrote: “The Reading Experience is something that you want to share with others and something that can come of discussions. Therefore, it is crucial that my classes read the same
texts.” To facilitate discussions and improve their quality, participants promoted reading together and aloud.

Informal discussions about literary texts were named safeguards ensuring that teaching goals were met. However, formal discussions were more common and mentioned by 17 participants. The sharing of reflections is not limited to oral practice, but written assignments were also mentioned. One participant presented responses that deviated from the others and listed a feeling of peace by the end of the school year as an indicator of the extent to which teaching goals are met.

In addressing aspects of fiction that participants find interesting, the sociocultural perspective was present in all but one code. Again, conversations with and between students were labeled an instructional strategy. Contextualization was another strategy, both thematically, historically, and in relation to students’ experiences. “I try to work with identification on different levels, and to place literary works in their social context” a participant wrote. These ways of contextualization are identical to the codes developed for Q11 in the analysis.

Three participants offer their own reading as the social and cultural surrounding through which students are to understand fiction. This modeling strategy is also visible in the response of one participant, who promotes reading aloud, since it “offers the teacher the opportunity to pause and comment on the text to give the students examples of how they could think”.

In pre-reading instructional activities, contextualization to create a surrounding to which students can relate the literary text, is common both thematically and historically. The sociocultural perspective was even more noticeable in activities during and post-reading. In these instances, the primary format is class discussions. One of the examples was a participant who discussed with the students “the context of the novel, possibly the literary period, with the purpose to relate to previous experiences and knowledge.”

7. Discussion

One of the strengths – but possibly also challenges – with open-ended questions is how they enable unanticipated answers, allowing respondents to introduce directions for the study that were not initially intended (Campbell, 1945; Fink, 2003b). Of the five central themes that sprang from the data, the final one is the one that most clearly deviate from what I intended to examine. The other four suggest that the role of the aesthetic is to enthuse the students to read fiction; that in striving to do so, the participants choose texts that they think facilitate the Reading Experience; and that instrumentality – as opposed to the aesthetic – is present in literature studies, urging the participants to involve the aesthetic.

The first central theme, the student as a subject, highlights the teachers’ concern for the potential that lies in individual student’s knowledge and experience, and how to navigate literature studies accordingly. This suggests classroom instructions that are both student-centered and differentiated in compliance with each individual student. Not only do students’ perspectives serve as a guide in selecting texts and modality, but personal interests are further believed to correlate with the Reading Experience.

This notion aligns with the theory that biographical elements (Michael et al., 2018), or apprenticeship (Dewey, 1934/2005), being the reader’s contribution to enabling the aesthetic experience. Thus, participants link what students read with what they know to strengthen what they view as the role of literature studies – and, thus, one of the teaching objectives – that is, to awaken students’ interest in fiction-reading.

The second central theme, making fiction accessible, differs from the previous one, despite their partly overlapping, in regard of the aspect from which texts are chosen to facilitate the Reading Experience. While, when students are made subjects, the focus is to achieve the Reading Experience through recognition, it is, in the case of making fiction accessible, closer to Felski’s (2008) discussion about how shock triggers reactions with readers. This indicates an awareness of the importance of emotional aspects when building a solid foundation for becoming a reader of fiction (Fatheddine, 2019).
It is a paradox that the curriculum and the subject syllabi – the goals of which comprise the third central theme – are both enabling and hindering the teaching of literature, since they are fundamental to participants’ instructional work. They enable the fiction-reading in the sense that fiction is clearly stipulated. At the same time, the syllabi are so extensive that it is difficult to cover all aspects in a satisfactory way. Thus, in their teaching of literature, fiction itself is not always the main focus, but act as the means to address other learning goals, such as reading comprehension and proficiency, which is suggested by Ewald (2007) and Johansson (2014).

The participants’ definition of the fourth central theme, Reading Experience, corresponds with Felski’s (2008) four modes of textual engagement. The reader’s feelings and how fictional content triggers reactions is similar to how Felski discusses shock, and the fictional world into which readers enter resembles Felski’s enchantment. Identification is not just another word for recognition but describes the same mechanisms in readers’ encounter with fiction. Finally, the responses that I have coded “other people” capture what Felski calls knowledge, that is, insights and knowledge that readers earn when introduced to a world through a character’s point of view. In conclusion, the Reading Experience is present in literature studies, which suggests an approach to fiction that empowers aesthetics and, thus, counters instrumentality in literature studies.

Finally, turning to the last central theme, there is a social dimension to fiction-reading (Langer, 1995; McCormick, 1994), and the social context determines how, what, and why we read (Andersson & Swedish Arts Council, 2015). The sociocultural perspective has been dominant in Educational Research during past decades (Fatheeddine, 2019), founded on Vygotsky’s (1986) theory that learning is socially situated and, thus, requires social interaction. According to a sociocultural perspective, knowledge is not generated individually, but collectively based on communication and language (Säljö, 2000).

This social dimension is clearly present in participants’ classroom practice, both as a means to relate students’ achievement to the curriculum and as a determining factor to what and how to read. Moreover, contextualization of the selected texts may be discussed as a way to extend the social surrounding beyond the physical classroom.

7.1. Further Research

The findings of this study show that participants consider the aesthetic aspect in their teaching of fiction. They have a clear definition of the Reading Experience and how it can or cannot be involved in literature studies. While some teachers maintained that they consciously include it, others noted that it is merely a by-product. To better understand the role of aesthetics in an educational landscape where instrumentality and measurability are key words, a chance for the participants to elaborate their responses would be beneficial.

Another informative aspect to further investigate is the dynamics between teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness – how is respective content related? Furthermore, if student-centered teaching is as beneficial as maintained by, among others, Mukhametshina and Akhmatova (2015) and Schrijvers et al. (2016), how may that approach be applied to literature studies?

A final aspect that exceeds the scope of this study is the curricular paradox discussed in 7. An analysis of the prescriptive documents is essential to understand how to navigate possibilities and challenges they involve, to optimize literature studies. Such analysis would also be helpful in handling discrepancies between the aesthetic approach to fiction and the instrumental one suggested when participants mentioned curricular goals.

7.2. Conclusions

In this study, I examined how teachers relate the Reading Experience to literature studies. Even though the results cannot be extrapolated beyond the 22 participants, and despite its limitation in sample size, the results gave an indication of the role of aesthetics in Swedish literature studies.
The most striking result was how participants were aware of the Reading Experience, and that their conceptual definition, which corresponded with Felski’s (2008) four aspects of engagement with reading, were similar. Furthermore, an interplay was detected between students’ interest in reading and the Reading Experience. The latter was both an objective and a means with which teachers attempted to raise students’ interest in reading.

I also wanted to learn about the role of teaching objectives in literature studies. The objectives found in the responses were primarily connected to the curriculum and subject syllabi, with language development and reading comprehension/proficiency being prominent components. This suggests that content and wording in prescriptive documents are crucial for classroom practice. Furthermore, in regard of teaching objectives, the Reading Experience played a less central role, and was regarded as a by-product that improves reading comprehension, while focus was elsewhere.

In addition, this study aimed to examine teaching approaches in literature studies. The results revealed classroom practice as twofold; participants described literature studies as teacher-centered in the sense that teachers’ choices are determined by the curriculum and subject syllabi and, thus, by teachers’ professional interpretation of these documents. Simultaneously, the results show that participants, in interpreting this, oftentimes take students’ perspective to modify the stipulated to match individual needs and interests. Thus, literature studies displays a student-centeredness within the teacher-centered framework, which turns the discussion to the last research question.

The findings show that differentiated instructions are introduced to the literary classroom for two reasons: student’s motivation and accessibility. The modifications involve selection of texts, mediality, extended deadlines, reading support, and examination form. The common denominator for the modifications is alterations of work material. However, the responses show a lack of adaptation of the ways in which participants teach the material.

The results from this study uncover a compartmentalization of aesthetic aspects of fiction-reading. On one hand, participants are aware of the Reading Experience and include it in literature studies. On the other hand, it is treated secondarily and incidentally. The participants showed no signs of working with the whole to strengthen the Reading Experience. Thus, even though biographical elements are represented in students’ reading, the full capacity of the aesthetic experience is not enabled, suggesting that the holistic character of encountering a text, proposed by both Dewey (1934/2005) and Felski (2008), may yet be furthered. By making literature studies more complete, teachers can offer students a unified reading of fiction, decompartmentalizing the measurable, formalistic instrumentality of reading and the non-measurable, aesthetic experience.

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