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Being a skilled reader: Reception patterns in vehicle engineering students’ literature discussion

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Abstract
This article explores how four male vehicle engineering students at an upper secondary school in Sweden engage in literature discussion. The study combines a Conversation Analysis (CA) approach with a reception theory perspective and shows that the boys use direct reported speech (DRS) in their interaction as a technique to handle intimate and personal dimensions in the text, but also to construct themselves as skilled readers. Approaching the empirical data in this way makes it possible to go beyond the stereotyped images of (working class) boys presented in so many research papers and provide a more nuanced picture of boys’ reception pattern in a school context.

Keywords: reading, literature reception, gender, literature discussion, school

Introduction
Recent international research as well as the school policy debate have drawn attention to boys’ underachievement in education, with boys’ lack of interest in reading being a particular concern. Boys read to a smaller extent than before, and they also read less than girls and lag behind in literacy skills (Gambell & Hunter, 2000; Martino, 1995; Moss, 2000). Extensive research testifies to boys’ distancing attitude to school and reading (Epstein, 1998; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ofsted, 1993, 2003; Willis, 1977), and often these boys establish an anti-swot culture in which reading literature in school is considered to be effeminate and unnecessary (Millard, 1997). Numerous studies show that students from working class homes not only lag behind more privileged students, but also that they tend to distance themselves from the culture they encounter in the school world more than other students, which makes the situation of working class boys problematic (Brown, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 2006; Feinstein, 2006; Nash & Carter, 2006; Willis, 1977).

The boys’ underachievement in education has a bearing on their access to higher education and future careers. It is also a matter of their rights to cultural and social development and opportunities to explore other ways of being a boy and a man. If we want boys to understand themselves better, to read their environment critically and have the chance to become active and engaged citizens in a democratic society,
it is indeed alarming that so many of them run the risk of missing out on opportunities in life.

In this article I analyse a literature discussion engaged in by working class boys and focus in particular on a sequence where the boys establish a distancing attitude towards the main character in the novel they are talking about. By making a close and detailed analysis of the boys’ interaction, I show that other processes are also at work in this discussion sequence beyond the distancing and the boyish jargon displayed. The detailed analysis reveals the boys’ working class affinity and allegiance and that they engage in the required reading and are eager to appear before each other as competent readers.

**Background**

A study with a seminal influence on research on boys and their relationship to school and studies is Paul Willis’ classic *Learning to Labor* (1977). In this study Willis shows how some British working class boys, “the lads”, in their encounter with school established a culture of resistance against the middle class norms and values they felt the school represented. For “the lads” the rejection of school was an important part of their construction of a working class identity and their resistance culture was something they associated with male behaviour. To appear as a real (working class) man, it was important for these boys to actively distance themselves from school, teachers and the education they encountered.

The research informed by Willis’ study has mostly focused on gender differences and has tended to draw attention to the most apparent aspects of the gender divide. As a result, boys have often been portrayed as school-tired, underachieving, noisy and poor readers, and in many studies a stereotyped, macho-oriented masculinity ideal emerges as a masculinity norm that is created and practiced by boys in school environments (Connell, 1995, 1996; Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Frosh, Pattman & Phoenix, 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Pascoe, 2007).

The gender pattern is also dominant in all the recently published reports on children’s and adolescents’ reading habits. These reports testify to a decreasing interest in reading generally, but particularly among boys and especially among working class boys (Clark & Akerman, 2006; Clark & Foster, 2005; Clark, Torsi & Strong, 2005; Goia, 2008).

There is also a variety of reception and classroom studies that confirm the gender differences in reading. Many of these show that not only do boys engage less in reading than girls, but also that they tend to distance themselves from both texts and teaching and that they are less able to integrate their own socialisation with the teaching content they encounter in school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Some studies even argue that boys’ distancing attitude to reading and literature is directly related to their masculinity construction (Cherland, 1994; Millard, 1997; Sarland, 1991).
Theoretical and methodological perspective

With its emphasis on the researcher’s prolonged presence in the studied environment, the ethnographic research tradition constitutes the methodological basis of this article (Delamont, 2008; Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005). In particular, the “micro-ethnographic” variant (Sahlström, 2008), which makes use of video recordings and Conversation Analysis (CA) as analytical tools (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Scheglof, 1992, 1996, 2007), plays an important part. CA is a research discipline that studies how “social life is established, sustained, and changed in and through the coordinated interaction of people” (Sahlström, 2009, p. 103). It derives from social constructionism and one of CA’s points of departure is that meaning and understanding is expressed and created between people when they communicate with each other. Verbal and non-verbal language is seen as a tool through which people construct and reconstruct their social reality.

From a CA perspective, it is impossible to understand an action without relating it to other actions. In the CA research tradition, it is important to study how conversation participants produce an action and how they show their interpretation and understanding of other participants’ actions and the new actions this generates (Goodwin, 2000; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Scheglof, 2006).

By studying shorter segments of a sequence of action that contribute to the meaning-constructing activity as a whole, it is possible to see both how the boys interact with each other and to see processes in the literature discussion that a broader approach may miss (see, for example, Asplund & Pérez Prieto, forthcoming).

This article also rests on the reception theoretical perspective that emphasises the dialogic element between the reader and the text in the reading process. In my analysis of the boys’ interaction, I refer to two concepts developed by Rosenblatt (1978/1994). According to Rosenblatt, there are two types of reading: efferent reading and aesthetic reading. With efferent reading, personal and interpretive reading is abandoned or postponed in favour of a reading that is more impersonal and literal-minded. Rosenblatt explains what happens when the efferent elements are emphasised:

She wants to get through the reading as quickly as possible and to retain the information that will serve her practical purpose. She is interested only in what the words point to – the objects, ideas, and action designated. Her own responses to these concepts or [...] associations of the words are of no importance to her, and indeed, the more she ignores these, [...] the more efficiently she reads. Her attention will be concentrated on what is to be assimilated for use after she has finished reading (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, p. 24).

Yet, with aesthetic reading the reader is concerned with what happens during the reading event and the reading then becomes more personal. For Rosenblatt, this means that the reader, unlike the efferent reader, directs their attention to the experiences, feelings and thoughts evoked in the encounter with the text.
Rosenblatt emphasises, however, that there is no contradiction between efferent and aesthetic reading. Instead, there is a dialectical relationship between them – one does not exclude the other – but, depending on the purpose of the reading, one is usually dominant.

At this point I should emphasise that my analysis does not attempt to determine the types of reading the boys performed in the actual reading of the novel. The processes revealed in the literature discussion are manifestations of other activities and I can only access the readings and reactions that the boys chose to highlight in the conversation when they talked about the texts they had read.

A further concept relevant to my analysis is Iser’s concept of *gaps* (1978). Iser argues that there are varying degrees of gaps in every text, created by elements that the author has for some reason omitted. To make the reading and the text meaningful, the reader must fill these gaps in with their own images and interpretations in interaction with the text, thus forming an idea of what the text communicates.

Although methodological and educational settings may impact on a given literature discussion, this issue will not be discussed here. Instead, the focus is on the boys’ orientation in the interaction in line with the CA perspective described above.

**The study**

The boys in the study are vehicle engineering programme students in upper secondary school. They are 18-19 years old and in the same class (there are no girls in the class). The programme they attend is a traditionally male-dominated vocational programme providing training for jobs such as car mechanics, truck drivers or excavators. The school where the boys study is located in a rural place in central Sweden.

For nearly three years, the author of this article worked as a teacher and researcher in the classroom studied. Extensive data, which include teacher’s notes, observation notes, the pupils’ written work, surveys, interviews, and 55 audio- and video-recorded literature discussions, were collected during this period. In this article the focus is on one sequence in one of those literature discussions.

**“Being one of the boys”**

The conversation that forms the basis of this article is a literature discussion involving four of the eleven boys in the vehicle engineering class: David, Henrik, Niklas and Jörgen. (In the excerpt below only three of them are active.) The literature discussion took place as part of their Swedish language instruction (the novel was an element of a larger theme work called “Who can join?”) and the boys were instructed to discuss Jonas Gardell’s novel *Ett ufo gör entré* [An UFO Makes an Entrance] (2001) based on questions relating to what the boys think of the main character in the novel, his situation, and his actions in the novel. The boys were also asked to discuss elements in the novel they found interesting, difficult or exciting.
The novel is about 15-year-old Juha and his experiences of being excluded from the school class community. In order to be accepted, Juha must lie and deny himself. At the end of the novel, Juha realises that all attempts to be part of the tough gang community have failed and he manages to break free and go his own way for the first time in his life. Dressed in a black leather jacket and with heavy eye makeup and a ring in his ear, the transformed Juha suddenly becomes someone that people take notice of in the schoolyard. Juha is now the object of both admiration and contempt, and on several occasions he is beaten up for his androgynous appearance. Juha, however, remains firm in his beliefs and for the first time in his life he feels that he has the courage to be himself.

Eight of the eleven boys in the class are present when the novel is discussed. The teacher has divided the class into two groups with four boys in each group. In front of each group there is a video camera recording the boys’ conversation.

Analyses of the boys’ conversation will be presented with a transcript reflecting some aspects of the interaction. Square brackets ([]) in vertical line positions are used to indicate simultaneous talk. Quotation marks indicate that the speaker is quoting someone. When empty parentheses are used, this means that something is being said, but no hearing can be achieved. A dot in parentheses indicates a short break (less than one second), and double “more than” (>>) means that the turn continues on another line. Text in double parentheses is my description of relevant information. When the whole word or part of a word is underlined, this is pronounced in a louder voice, and colons are used to indicate the prolongation of the immediately preceding sound.

In the excerpt below, Henrik begins by saying that he has come to think of a scene in the novel:

**Excerpt 1: Pretty awesome**

1. Henrik: And then what the hell was I thinking of then ( . ) oh yes when they were at the school nurse office.
2. Niklas: Yeah, that was fun!
3. Henrik: Yeah, it was pretty awe[some!]
4. David: [The school nurse?]
5. Henrik: Mhm, at the end of the novel, well [al- almost at the end.
6. David: [When-]
7. Niklas: Yes, when he was talking about this ring [or whatever the hell it was.
8. Henrik: [Yeah.
9. David: Uhum, [right.
10. Henrik: [‘You can become la:me from that!’ ((In an artificial voice.))]
11. ((Niklas and David laugh.))
12. Niklas: He thought they were gay.
13. Henrik: Yeah ( . ) yeah right [and than just ‘I understand I understand’ [and than he >>
14. Niklas: [ ( ) ] [I don’t think-
15. Henrik: >> meets teachers just ‘I understand’ and stuff.
17. Niklas: I don’t think he’s gay either, he just kinda wants to have attention.
18. David: Wasn’t he bisexual he says?
19. Niklas: Yeah, yeah it-
20. David: Then he is a real fag.
21. Henrik: He, yeah.
22. Niklas: Yes.
23. Henrik: Half queer.
24. Niklas: Yeah, haha!
25. Henrik: Humping-palm!

The scene the boys are talking about depicts Juha’s and his friend Roy’s visit to the school nurse. She has called them in for a conversation about the rings in their ears. The school nurse first warns the boys about the infection risks of having their ears pierced with non-disinfected needles. The conversation then develops into a conversation about the boys’ sexual orientation (the nurse suspects the boys are gay because they have rings in their ears) and she explains to the boys that they are going through a phase and that they are sexually confused.

Once Henrik has presented the event in the novel that he remembers and wants to draw attention to, Niklas shows (line 3) that he understands which event Henrik wants to talk about. When Niklas then exclaims: “Yeah, that was fun!” he is immediately backed up by Henrik who says that “it was pretty awesome!” (line 4). Both Henrik and Niklas agree that ‘the nurse scene’ was special in a positive way. When they make that clear to each other, David shows that he wants to know which event they are talking about (line 5). He clearly has problems remembering the scene and needs help to establish contact with the text and both Henrik and Niklas help out by retelling the scene (lines 6, 8-16). Together they build a common story about what they have read.

The boys’ ways of retelling the plot show that they seem to side with Juha. When Niklas says that he (Juha) “was talking about this ring or whatever the hell it was” (line 8), the second half of his utterance, “or whatever the hell it was” can be interpreted as a commitment to Juha. If so, Niklas is reading the situation from the perspective of Juha and he indicates that he thinks the adults are ‘whining’ about Juha’s appearance, and he sees the conflict between Juha and the school nurse as a typical conflict between adults and teenagers. Henrik’s and Niklas’s subsequent actions reinforce this impression.

In line 11 an interesting phase starts in the conversation. Henrik has the floor and says: “You can become la:me from that!” At first glance, he seems to be the author of the utterance but, since we have access to the wider context, it is possible to trace the utterance to the scene in the novel and it is clear that Henrik remembers the scene well:

She [the school nurse], rests her elbows on the desk top and folds her thoroughly cleaned hands so hard that her knuckles whiten while she looks at the boys speechless with disgust. [...]

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‘You do know that you can become lame from that’, she finally snaps and snorts. Then she is quiet again.
‘What, I don’t get it?’ says Juha, frowning, not really understanding what she means.
‘Well, the rings, the earrings. I hope you are aware that there may well be an infection that can cause lameness of half the face. I guess you did it yourselves. On each other, I assume’ (Gardell 2001, p. 258, my translation).

Henrik’s “You can become lame from that” is probably a combination of the nurse’s two utterances in the excerpt above. Her first reply, “You do know that you can become lame from that” is shortened, but Henrik adds the nurse’s emphasis on “lameness” in her second utterance to the word “lame”. Niklas and David then laugh (line 12) at Henrik’s action and Niklas develops the retelling when he highlights how “he” (probably referring to the school nurse) thought that Juha and Roy were “gay” (line 13).

In his classic text “Footing”, Goffman shows (1981) how participants in interaction can use various techniques to shift the alignment or stance they take up vis-à-vis themselves and others. Goffman coins the term ‘footing’, which he describes as follows:

A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we managed the production or repetition of an utterance (Goffman, 1981, p. 128).

One technique of changing footing is to quote something that someone else has said. In CA research, several different terms have been used to describe this phenomenon, including quotation, reported speech and direct reported speech (henceforth DRS). DRS can perform several functions. A speaker can, for instance, signal his approval or disapproval of the speaker quoted (Goffman, 1981; Goodwin, 2007; Holt, 2000). In his way of retelling the story (by quoting the school nurse), Henrik not only retells the school nurse’s act, but he also portrays her as a prudelike adult who does not catch on. Henrik finds the entire statement ridiculous and acts out his alignment in front of his classmates. In Goffman’s terminology (1981), Henrik animates the school nurse as a figure.

In lines 14 and 16, Henrik uses DRS again (after having affirmed Niklas’ earlier statement in line 13) when he retells a subsequent sequence from the novel in a way that once again clearly indicates ridicule of adult reactions to Juha. After the conversation with the nurse, Juha meets some teachers at the school who are very eager to tell Juha that they understand him. Juha, however, does not understand what it is that the adults say they understand, but Gardell indicates to the reader that the teachers think that Juha is gay. The words “I understand” that Henrik says twice in his turn (line 14), and again in line 16, are repeated by various teachers as a mantra in this scene. The teacher Sundin will serve as an example:

‘But ...’, Juha starts, and is immediately interrupted by Sundin who cries: ‘It’s good, it’s good! I understand! I understand! You don’t have to say anything, I understand!’ (Gardell, 2001, p. 262, my translation).
By retelling the story in this way, Henrik demonstrates his attitude to the event in the novel, yet he also lends authenticity to the storytelling. As Henrik narrates the scene, the story is enacted for his classmates. Not only does he show that he has read the text, but also that he has taken note of it and has an insight into what the boys are talking about. As Holt (1996) points out, DRS in this way also works as a proof.

“Not being one of the boys”

The boys’ opinions are constructed through processes of interaction in which they are “building action in concert with each other” (Goodwin, 2007, p. 28). This means that the story the boys are producing in their literature discussion is constructed through their coordinated actions. Together they are creating a common story about the text they have read.

In line 17, however, something happens that makes the conversation take a new turn. Niklas is in fact ventilating his interpretation of Juha’s sexual orientation when he says: “I don’t think he is gay either, he just kinda wants to have attention”. According to Goodwin, a conversation participant must consider what has been said and done earlier in the conversation, together with “the implications that has for the trajectory of future action” (2007, p. 28). In this view, Niklas’ utterance can be seen as an extension or a continuation of what he has said before (line 13): “He thought they were gay”. Even here Niklas’ attitude to Juha can be sensed and the two utterances are thereby linked.

Although the utterance in line 13 is adapted to the boys’ storytelling jargon developed in the sequence, he does not use ‘I’ to refer to himself but, similarly to Henrik, creates a distance when he quotes the nurse, thus indicating that there is a character in the novel who thinks that Juha and Roy are “gay”. When Niklas then receives a confirmation from Henrik, who develops the retelling (lines 14 and 16) and in fact indirectly supports Niklas’ interpretation, Niklas is given the signal and support he needs to dare articulating his interpretation of Juha’s sexuality explicitly, namely that Juha is not gay.

David responds immediately (line 18) with the objection that Juha is bisexual and he justifies this by referring to what Juha says in the novel. In this sequence, David changes footing and the conversation changes in character and direction. For the first time we have a situation in the literature discussion where the boys do not agree and the construction of the common story comes to an abrupt end. With this utterance David shifts stance on what the boys are talking about, but also vis-à-vis Niklas. Yet Niklas agrees with David’s objection (by affirming it) and David pursues his argument and upgrades his version, claiming that, if Juha is bisexual, he is a “real fag” (line 20). By using the word “fag”, David signals his disapproval and his superiority over Juha with whom he does not want to identify (Pascoe, 2007) and together they construct what Connell (1995, 1996) would call a hegemonic masculinity. Henrik then agrees (line 21) followed by Niklas (line 22).
The sequence continues with Henrik exclaiming: “Half queer” (line 23), which probably refers to Juha and again a dissociation from Juha is marked in the conversation. Niklas then laughs (line 24), which can be construed as an affirmative act of Henrik’s comments and as an attempt to rejoin the community of the group. The sequence ends with Henrik saying “Humping-palm”.

With David’s reaction the conversation takes a new turn which has immediate consequences for the readings expressed in the conversation. This example illustrates how the boys’ readings clash and how Niklas’ interpretation that Juha is not gay is ignored in favour of David’s (and Henrik’s) perceptions of Juha. When Henrik allies with David, Niklas has two choices: He can choose to confront and challenge David’s and Henrik’s interpretation, or he can conform and join them and their community. As we have seen, he opts for the latter.

This example shows that alliance formation affects the themes and interpretations that gain attention in the conversation. By openly supporting each other’s interpretations, as Henrik and David do, the boys form an alliance and, as soon as this alliance is formed, the interpretations supported by the alliance gain ground. At the same time, the interpretation unsupported by an alliance, i.e. Niklas’ interpretation, is difficult to assert.

We can also see that the boys have a focus on the external action in the novel when they retell the scene from the novel and reproduce what the characters say. Focusing only on external action and being unwilling to discuss feelings and relationships also constitute a reception pattern that is linked to male readers in a variety of literature reception studies (Martino, 1995; Sarland, 1991).

However, the fact that the vehicle engineering boys spend more time referring to the plot instead of engaging in Juha’s emotional needs can be seen not simply as a manifestation of an ongoing masculinity construction, but also as a way for the boys to show each other that they have read the text, thus using the literature discussion to construct themselves as competent readers. From this interpretative horizon, Niklas’ comment entails a violation of the boys’ retelling of the plot and is therefore not primarily a comment that could lead to an undesired (for boys) discussion about feelings, but is instead a comment that disrupts the boys’ retelling of the scene and their work to construct themselves as skilled readers. In Rosenblatt’s terminology (1978/1994), it is efferent reading that comes to the fore in the focus on plot and dialogue in their conversation.

At the same time, we can see that through their direct and/or indirect quotation of characters in the novel the boys mark their stances in relation to the characters in the novel, as well as to themselves and their classmates. This technique allows the boys to approach Juha in a way that is accepted within the group. The distancing attitude that characterises the rest of the conversation is abruptly dispelled at these moments and the boys allow themselves to take sides with the rebellious Juha, and together they laugh about adult prejudices and views on Juha as a homosexual.
Yet this way of talking about the novel also displays more than an efferent approach. Admittedly, they focus on the external action of the scene discussed – in fact on several occasions they literally reproduce what is said in the text – but in the process they also reveal their perceptions of what they have read. Although efferent reading is dominant, there are aesthetic features in the boys’ retelling. The analysis of their interaction therefore shows that Rosenblatt’s concepts and their implications assume other dimensions if applied to the study of literature discussions rather than reading. Rosenblatt certainly argues that there is a dialectical relationship between the two types of readings, but the boys’ interaction also shows that this does not necessarily only involve a switch between the two; they might co-occur – here and now – in a single utterance.

However, when one of the students, Niklas, abruptly switches conversation technique, shifts perspective by talking about himself in the first person, and shows an openness to the text and its possibilities (in Rosenblatt’s terminology, showing aesthetic elements in his reception), he transgresses the limit the boys themselves have set and is therefore immediately challenged by David who questions his interpretation. The boys then fall back into the distancing jargon they established earlier in the conversation and reactivate what could be called a protection pattern in their reception.

One explanation of why Niklas does not continue to assert his interpretation could be David’s reference to what the text says. Since Juha, according to David, says he is bisexual then that must be true. In this respect, the two boys’ exchange testifies to a conception of the text as factual. The boys do in fact have a conception that the text has an inherent truth, which David indirectly claims to have discovered and which also wins the acclaim of the group.

Since Niklas’ picture of Juha is not explicitly stated in the text in a way that the boys would expect – i.e. it is not there ‘in the line’ – it is difficult for him to assert his interpretation. Although David refers in his argumentation to a scene in the novel in which Juha says he is bisexual, the reference is, as we can see, not directly to this scene but to the only instance in the novel where Juha says he is bisexual. This scene occurs at the end of the novel. Leaving a disco with his classmate Roy, Juha is confronted by some ‘tough’ guys from the upper secondary school as he is waiting for the bus. The leader of this gang, Mattias Berg, picks a fight with Juha by asking him if he is “gay”.

When for the third time he asks Juha if he is “gay”, Juha answers:

‘I’m bisexual!’ and looks Mattias Berg straight into the eyes.
‘What? What do you mean by that?’
‘I am with both boys and girls.’

If you can lie about one thing you might as well lie about the other. Juha has determined himself. He would be all that Mattias Berg hates (Gardell, 2001, pp. 290-291, my translation).

The tough upper secondary school boys have several times before shown their contempt for Juha, who they find way too weirdly dressed for their tastes, and now the time has come once and for all to define Juha’s sexuality.
It is clear that Juha’s statement can be interpreted in several ways. Although he says he is bisexual, there is an indication that he is lying (which he also says himself) about his sexuality. What David’s and Niklas’ dialogue in lines 17-22 thus illustrates is what happens when two different readings meet in a literature discussion. Through his argument David shows that he is bound by what is in the text, whereas Niklas is probably more open to reading between the lines. Niklas is filling out what Iser (1978) calls the text’s gap, the absences of connections that the reader must provide in order to make meaning of the text. He is identifying the unwritten elements in the novel in order to make sense of Juhas’ behaviour and the people who surround him, thereby emerging as a reader who takes an active and creative part in the dialogic process between the reader and the text in a way that David does not. In other words, the text has engaged Niklas’ imagination “in the task of working things out for himself” (Iser, 1974, p. 275), and he can construct a picture of Juha as a boy who lies about his sexuality simply because he wants to “have attention” (line 17).

Conclusion

At first sight, it is very tempting to draw attention to the distancing and homophobic jargon the boys develop at the end of the sequence analysed in this article. In their attitudes the boys represent the prevailing image that is described in so many studies about boys in school. But, as we have seen, a detailed conversation analysis of the boys’ interaction can reveal the contradictions in their reception pattern.

The analysis shows that the boys, by using DRS, indirectly display openness to the text and the main character, Juha. But Niklas’ utterance in line 17 violates the boys’ retelling of the novel, which makes the boys as a group build a protection wall in their reading, which in turn leads to a situation in which the text is reduced. From this point the reception is closer to the text as fact and in their search for a specific meaning they turn on the “fag” Juha from the perspective of the tough upper secondary school boys. In this process, they also indirectly side with the nurse who had shortly before been ridiculed, which shows how contradictory their reception pattern is.

The boys’ construction of a sense of togetherness and their textually-close reading are in many ways factors that restrain them in the conversation and make it difficult for them to develop their literary competence.

The analysis shows, for example, how one of the boys, Niklas, is forced to abandon a more open and independent approach to the text and to Juha for the benefit of the group’s more instrumental and textually-close reading. But it is also possible to detect other elements in the literature discussion which show that the boys have the potential to develop as readers.

It is clear, for instance, that the boys have invested themselves in the reading and on occasions in the conversation the boys allow themselves to discuss issues related to boys’ sexuality, albeit addressed indirectly through the retelling style the boys established in the conversation. It is also a fact that the boys themselves initiate the
scene they are talking about in the conversation, which indicates that the scene and its events have affected them.

Further, it seems that the boys are eager to appear as skilled readers to one another. Their way of retelling the plot of the novel and their use of DRS is a way for them to prove they have read the text and that they have kept track of details in it. Therefore, it is feasible to describe these elements as processes through which the boys construct themselves as competent readers. If we look at the literature discussion from this perspective, we are faced with a group of working class boys who become involved in the literature instruction in school and take responsibility for their own learning. This is, however, not only something that occurs in the excerpt analysed in this article, but also in the actions and reception patterns that can be identified throughout the boys’ discussion about the novel, as well in other literature discussions engaged in by the boys in the vehicle engineering programme class (Asplund, 2010).

The result of the analysis in this article indicates a need to go one step further and present images of working class boys’ behaviour in school environments that challenge the stereotyped images presented in many research papers. The analysis has gone beyond the distancing jargon that the boys establish in the literature discussion and has thereby modified and expanded on the discussion of reading and literature instruction in school. The vehicle engineering boys’ interaction shows that literature and reading are important to them and that it is vital that these boys are given ongoing opportunities to receive literary instruction in school.

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