

Ida L. Gabrielsen, University of Oslo

Literature education in The Norwegian curriculum renewal

Reading literature remains at the heart not only of the language arts curriculum but of the cultural debate and the educated public sphere of imaginative and experiential reflection in general. Across the world, educational systems invest heavily in the expectation that literary reading in the classroom may teach students a number of social, human, and cultural values. Active engagement in literary reading has long been considered a form of vicarious experience (Rosenblatt, 2005), and it is linked with the ability to understand the perspectives of others (Poulet, 1969). The imaginative powers of literature may even expand our capacity for empathy and social judgment (Nussbaum, 1997). Interestingly, empirical studies have recently supported such notions (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho, & Rijlaarsdam, 2019). However, recent trends in national policies on literacy—favoring comprehension over creativity, cognition over feeling, and measurable skills over *Bildung*—have reactivated the need to investigate how literature is actually read and taught in school (Alsup, 2015; Ongstad, 2015).

In a study presented in “The Role of Literature in the Classroom - How and for what purposes do teachers in lower secondary school use literary texts?” (Gabrielsen, Blikstad-Balas&Tengberg, 2019), we investigated the use of literary texts in 178 video-recorded LA lessons across 47 lower-secondary Norwegian classrooms, using video data from the large-scale video study Linking Instruction and Student Achievement (Klette, Blikstad-Balas & Roe, 2017). The article offers a systematic overview of how literary texts are read, used, and discussed across classrooms and investigates instructional practices related to literary texts and functions of texts in instruction. The results revealed a strong genre discourse across classrooms; reading literary texts was strongly connected to students’ own writing, focusing on generic text features that are relevant for texts across the same genre. The findings align with concerns raised by scholars about the role of literature in language arts, revealing a rather reductionist use of literature across classrooms.

In the article “Hvilken litteratur møter elevene i norskfaget? - En analyse av hvilke skjønnlitterære verk som inngår i 178 norsktimer på åttende trinn»¹ (Gabrielsen&Blikstad-Balas, 2020), we investigated what literary texts students from the same classrooms as mentioned read. Our major findings were that the repertoire of literature made available to students is limited and from subject specific textbooks. Further, we found extensive use of literary excerpts, and that when students read entire novels these were self-chosen and intended for individual reading, not shared literary experiences. The literary texts were all typical of their literary genre, e.g. typical short stories – and never challenge classical genre features. The article can be read as an argument for reevaluating the role of literature in the classroom.

Drawing on these findings, this paper is an early draft, or rather an outline, of an article where I plan to analyze the new curriculum in Norwegian Language Arts in light of theoretical and empirical research within the field of literature didactics. The revision is part of the national subject renewal (Fagfornyelsen) that is to be implemented august 2020. The national curriculum renewal entails a new core curriculum stating values and principles for primary and secondary education, new subject curricula and changes in the curriculum structure. A revised definition of competence attracts attention to and facilitate in-depth learning, and three interdisciplinary topics will be introduced: Health and Life Skills², Democracy and Citizenship³, and Sustainable Development⁴.

To give an example on my initial (and rather unstructured) readings of the renewed curriculum, I'll show how I have linked the interdisciplinary topic Health and Life Skills to literature instruction:

In the core curriculum ([UDIR](#)) one can read that life skills “refers to the ability to understand and influence factors that are important for mastering one's own life”, and the topic is meant to help students deal with both success and failure, personal and practical challenges. The students are supposed to work with matters such as “value choices and the importance of meaning in life and relations with others, the ability to draw boundaries and to respect others' boundaries, and the ability to deal with thoughts, feelings and relationships”. Following researcher in literature didactics Judith Langer (2011; 2013),

¹English title: Fiction in Norwegian language arts – A study of literary texts used in 178 lessons in 8th grade

² Folkehelse og livsmestring

³ Demokrati og medborgerskap

⁴ Bærekraftig utvikling

the literary experience “involves openness and inquiry—where we continually search for and ‘try out’ possibilities for the moment and for the future” (Langer, 2011, p. 29). We look for the untold story, we search for meaning. An open-ended search like this is a way of reasoning that differs from other kinds of thinking. As Langer (2013) emphasizes, “reading literature involves cognitive dimensions that are critical components of intellectual development” (p. 162). Literature instruction then, has the potential to help students develop critical, explorative and creative thinking, abilities Langer point out as crucial in times when we, probably more than any time before, do not know exactly what kind of skills and knowledge will be needed even in our near future. Moreover, critical and creative thinking capacities will most likely benefit the students throughout their education across subjects, in future jobs and in their personal life and relationships.

The example above is just one of many possible links between the subject renewal and literature didactics. Based on my first round of reading the new curriculum, I do think that it is a promising starting point to explore both reasons for why students read fiction in school, and arguments and potential for why and how the use and selection of literary texts in school could vary more than the findings in our studies described above indicate. However, this thoughts and questions are in an early stage, and I need to decide on an analytical framework for the content analysis of the curriculum. There are several methodological issues here, and I hope to discuss them with fellow researchers at the QUINT-conference in June.