

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

How and for what purposes do teachers in lower secondary school use literary texts?

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of literary texts in 178 video-recorded LA lessons across 47 lower-secondary Norwegian classrooms. It 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 reveal a strong genre discourse across classrooms; reading literary texts is strongly connected to students' own writing, focusing on generic text features that are relevant for texts across the same genre. With one exception, shared instruction did not include novels except as individual pleasure reading. 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. Despite strong arguments and empirical support for students reading literature in school, such practices are poorly reflected in classrooms in this study. Our main contribution lies in the exploration of the practices by which adolescents are socialized into literary reading. We provide an exhaustive look at the everyday practices related to literary texts in language arts lessons and the ways these texts are framed, read, and discussed in education.

Keywords: literature instruction; secondary education; reading; instructional practices; video analyses; uses of literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading literature remains at the heart not only of the language arts (LA) 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, both for adult readers (e.g., Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015) and within a secondary language arts school context (see Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho, & Rijlaarsdam's (2019) thorough review of literature classroom interventions studies). 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). Certainly, the imaginative potential of which Aristotle speaks in his *Poetics* and the critical powers that Nussbaum has tied to the reading of literature come neither by themselves nor without careful teaching. Therefore, exploring the practices and functions by which adolescents are introduced to literature in school is an endeavor that is both essential and timely in educational research.

Following Judith Langer, 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). This kind of inquiry is different from other kinds of thinking; it has the potential to support and improve explorative and creative thinking. As Langer (2013) emphasizes, “reading literature involves cognitive dimensions that are critical components of intellectual development” (p. 162). Reading fiction develops not only literary text competence but also a more general text competence as well as enabling students to acquire knowledge and express themselves in various subjects and situations (Alsup, 2013; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Langer, 2011, 2013; Leverage, Mancing, Schweickert, & William, 2011). The extent and degree of children's opportunities to engage with literary texts at home vary greatly (e.g., Heath, 1982; Wazik & Van Horn, 2012). Therefore, meetings between students and literary texts orchestrated by competent schoolteachers have become increasingly important. If literary competence is something that schools should develop (as is often the expectation across countries), it is of paramount importance that teachers contribute to socializing students into ways of reading literature and the literary discourse that we draw on to make sense of what we read.

While literary texts still play a key role in LA instruction, the meaning of reading in the context of language arts has undergone a shift in many countries: many curricula and policies in educational systems around the world now stress the

importance of generic text competence and non-fiction literacy skills (see, e.g., Harris & Ammermann, 2016; Liberg, Wiksten Folkeryd, & Geijerstam, 2012; Pieper, Aase, Fleming, & Samahaian, 2007; Witte & Sâmihaiian, 2013). Some scholars worry that this change may leave less room for literature in the curriculum and less time for reading fiction in the classroom (Alsup, 2015; Appleman, 2014, Krogh & Penne, 2015; Langer, 2013; Penne, 2013; Stotsky, Traffas, & Woodworth, 2010).

The situation is no different in Norway (Ongstad, 2015), where this study was conducted. Fiction and non-fiction have the same status in the national curriculum from 2006, which contains fewer guidelines than in previous curricula regarding how instruction might be organized and what literature students should read.

The increased focus on generic skills, which might challenge the value of literature, calls for deeper knowledge of how literary texts are used in LA instruction and how teachers justify the reading of literary texts. Further, studies of literary texts in instructional contexts have often considered existing textbooks and curricula, thus providing important information about the *intended or possible* rather than the *actual* teaching of literature. While such studies are important, they cannot broaden our understanding of actual practices in LA classrooms, including the use of literary texts and how teachers socialize students into using them. A number of small-scale studies have considered students working with literature, particular pedagogies, or even literary interventions. While these studies are well suited to inform theoretical development and analytical work, they, again, do not provide solid descriptive and observational data on the roles of literature in classrooms.

How literature is presented through instruction in the LA subject is crucial, as the literary tradition within which students learn appears to be an important factor influencing how students handle literary qualities in the texts they read (Alsup, 2013; Johansson, Myrberg, & Rosén, 2015). There are several ways to approach literary texts in educational settings (e.g., Grossman, 2001; Langer, 2011, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1978), and a key aspect is that students need to engage in meaningful instructional practices with a variety of texts that prompt them to build a deeper understanding of textual content (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000; Duke & Carlisle, 2010; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011; Nystrand, 2006; Nystrand & Gomoran, 1991). However, the way in which students actually work with literary texts in LA lessons remains an understudied area.

2. AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study is to contribute to the body of research on literature instruction in the classroom by providing empirical data and discussion about literary texts, their reading, and prevalent instructional practices related to literature in 8th grade LA instruction in Norway. The study emphasizes how students engage with literature—as the quality and focus of literature instruction is fundamental for students' development and learning.

The study also emerges from the ambition to investigate the everyday teaching practices in LA classrooms and how literary texts are embedded in these, rather than engaging in researcher-manipulated interventions that specifically prompt the reading of literature or specific ways of teaching literature. Drawing on 178 videotaped LA lessons from 47 Norwegian lower-secondary classrooms, the study captures what has been labeled “naturally occurring” instruction (e.g., Hassan et al., 2005; Magnusson et al., 2019), in the sense that teachers are not asked to do or refrain from doing anything in particular; rather, the recorded lessons attempt to capture the logic of ordinary instruction. Regarding the foundation of these recordings, the study investigates how students engage with literature and how literary texts are used and discussed across LA lessons. The following research question guided the analyses: What are the prevalent instructional practices related to literary texts, and what are the dominant functions of the texts within these practices?

3. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous empirical research and theories developed on the practices and principles of literature instruction offer multiple valuable perspectives that inform observational studies such as the present one. This section considers strands in previous research that relate to the prevalent instructional practices in language arts classrooms.

Longstanding traditions in the teaching of literature. During the 1990s, a number of large-scale observational studies on literature curricula and teaching practices, primarily from the United States, indicated that both the selection of texts and instructional approaches in LA remained quite traditional (Applebee, 1993; Langer, 2011; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). Scholars argued that classroom practices were still drawing on the interpretive tradition of New Criticism (Jones, 2001; Smagorinsky, 2002; see also Francis 2008 for a more recent account), that is, the experience of the individual reader was left outside the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1995). What was clear from classroom observations was that the teaching of literature often conveyed teacher interpretations of texts rather than strategies for interpretation, and texts were treated as containers of meaning rather than as tools for thinking (Langer, 2011). In addition, the teaching of literature was panned for being largely monologic rather than dialogic in the sense that teacher questions provided only limited support for student thinking and reflection. According to a study based on data from over 2000 literature lessons in American eighth- and ninth-grade classrooms, open dialogue about different interpretations of texts was rare (Nystrand et al., 1997).

Discussion-based approaches. Drawing on these results while simultaneously attempting to validate the implications of both reader-response theories (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978) and sociocognitive theory (Langer, 1985), Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) investigated the relationship between discussion-based instructional approaches in the classroom and student literary performance. By “discussion-based approaches,” the authors referred to instruction that

(i) emphasizes students as capable of substantially contributing to the joint understanding of literature; (ii) involves genuine conversations about literary texts; (iii) focuses on developing understanding rather than testing understanding; and (iv) encourages multiple perspectives to enrich understanding beyond consensus interpretations (Applebee et al., 2003, p. 691). Results from the study's diverse sample indicated that discussion-based approaches were positively related to the development of "high literacy" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), that is, the ability to engage in more complex and situated literacy practices, such as responding to and discussing literature. Interestingly, the effects were significant for both better and poorer students. Other studies have reached similar conclusions, indicating, for instance, that open-ended discussion, interpretation, and evaluation of literature is a characteristic of high-performing schools and relates positively to student comprehension (Langer, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003). Further, particular qualities of classroom conversation contribute to both inferential comprehension and critical thinking about texts (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009; Soter et al., 2008; Wilkinson & Son, 2010).

In a recent review of empirical research on intervention studies in secondary literature classrooms examining whether literature education may foster adolescents' insight into human nature, Schrijvers et al. (2019) found full (N=7) or partial (N=2) empirical support in 9 of 13 included studies for the expected effects of literature education in terms of students gaining insight into themselves (Halasz, 1991) and improving their understanding of, perspective on, and intended behavior toward real-world others with regard to conflict resolution, (Stevahn et al., 1996, 1997), sexual harassment (Malo-Juvera, 2014), sexual orientation (Malo-Juvera (2016), immigration (Vezzali et al., 2012), and caring for others (Adler & Foster, 1997). The authors of the review suggested that "literary instruction, under certain conditions, may foster students' insight into human nature" (Schrijvers et al., 2019, p. 33), and based on an analysis of instructional approaches for which empirical support for students' increased insight was found, the authors proposed three individual design principles as guidelines for classrooms practices *and* further research: 1) use of thematically relevant fictional texts; 2) writing tasks to (a) activate previous personal experiences before reading, (b) notice and annotate during reading, and (c) reflect on evoked experiences after reading; and 3) exploratory dialogic activities related to fictional texts and themes (Schrijvers et al., 2019, p.34).

Based on the principles of reader-response theories, Janssen, Braaksma, and Couzijn (2009) investigated the effect of different forms of self-questioning on students' appreciation and interpretation of literature. Their results showed that, for experienced readers, appreciation and interpretation were influenced by both guided and unguided self-questioning practices, whereas for less experienced readers, only guided self-questioning affected story interpretation. In another experimental study, Tengberg, Olin-Scheller, and Lindholm (2015) investigated whether students' narrative comprehension was improved by teaching students multiple reading and comprehension strategies. This study was influenced by dialogic theory

and used an open-ended discussion format as the context for strategy instruction. On average, no intervention effect was detected. However, among low-achieving students, the effect on narrative comprehension was significant and substantial ($d = 0.47$). Other studies investigating how students' narrative comprehension is supported have concentrated on developing awareness of story structure and identifying literary themes (e.g., Williams & Pao, 2011).

Experiential and analytical approaches. Despite the strong positioning of discussion-based approaches in recent theoretical developments as well as evidence from design studies, limited knowledge exists regarding the extent of its use in classrooms. This is also the case for influential instructional traditions based on *experiential* and *analytical* approaches (Brevik, Fosse, & Rødnes, 2014; Rødnes, 2014). Within an experiential approach, interpretive work departs from students' experience of the literary text and encourages subjective reasoning. Rather than focusing on comprehension and developing interpretation as a skill, experiential approaches emphasize the unique meeting between reader and text, targeting appreciation of literature as an aesthetic process. The experiential approaches draw on theoretic perspectives from reader-response theories (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978) and cognitive theory regarding the function of literature, such as the theory of mind (Mar & Oatley, 2008). In an analytical approach, interpretation is predominantly text-oriented rather than reader-oriented, using evidence from the text rather than experience as a basis for analysis (Rødnes, 2012; Swann & Allington, 2009). Theoretically, the analytical approach is closer to literary theory and the analytical traditions of comparative literature.

Comparative studies of the instructional focus and interpretive behavior of students in different European countries indicate that the analytical approach is more prevalent in, for instance, French and Russian literature education, while the experiential approach appears dominant in countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway (Johansson, 2015; Torell, 2002; van de Ven & Docke, 2011). Some of these studies also indicate that the instructional traditions and curricula of different countries have substantial effects on students' interpretive repertoires (Johansson, 2015; Torell, 2002). Experimental studies on the short-term effects of different instructional approaches show similar indications. Fialho, Zyngier, and Miall (2011) compared the effects of interpretive and experiential approaches and found that the former seemed to promote a more plot- or story-driven reading style while the latter spurred more voluntary participation in discussion. In a similar study, Liang (2011) investigated whether sixth-grade students' comprehension and response were affected differently by a reader-response approach (equivalent to the experiential approach) and a cognitive-oriented approach (emphasizing active participation and scaffolding comprehension through strategy instruction). Although no difference was found in terms of their contribution to general comprehension, the study showed that the response-based approach promoted a superior ability to apply different response modes to open-ended tasks, while the cognitive-oriented approach was more beneficial in promoting students' use of textual evidence to support

interpretations. Researchers propose that teachers should facilitate both personal and analytical readings (e.g., Alsup, 2015; Rødnes, 2014, Langer, 2013).

Sustained silent reading. The use of sustained silent reading (SSR)—where students read individually in (mainly) self-selected books (Malloy & Gambrell, 2012)—is widespread in American classrooms (Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). The practice is also known as independent reading time (IRT), drop everything and read (DEAR), and individual reading (IR). Such independent reading is a growing practice in Norwegian classrooms (for an overview, see Svanes, 2016). As an instructional practice, SSR of self-selected books has been promoted for its potential to stimulate motivation and positive attitudes towards reading (Siah & Kwok, 2010; Von Sprecken & Krashen, 1998) and to combine the student's development of literary judgment with pleasurable reading (Bertschi-Kaufmann & Graber, 2017). Research shows that continued silent reading might improve reading flow (Pressley & Allington, 2014), vocabulary (Cunningham, 2005), and reading comprehension (Hiebert, Wilson, & Trainin, 2010). However, focus has recently shifted from *how much* to *how*, emphasizing the importance of instructional quality in silent individual reading (e.g., Svanes, 2016; Topping, Samuels, & Paul, 2007). In American classrooms, this has led to a change towards a more active teacher role in SSR, which is now more commonly referred to as scaffolded silent reading (ScSR; Reutzel et al., 2008). No large-scale studies have investigated the extent or quality of SSR in the Nordic countries. However, findings in a recent study on teachers' role during silent reading in Norwegian classrooms (Svanes, 2016) indicate that teachers' scaffolding and variation in individual guidance has developed over the last decade compared with earlier classroom practices (e.g. Haug, 2006; Klette, 2003). However, these studies all consider instruction on the elementary level, leaving a research gap concerning SSR instructional practices in the higher grades that requires investigation of both the extent and instructional quality of students' individual in-class reading.

Language arts in the Norwegian context. The empirical data for this study were gathered in Norwegian lower-secondary classrooms. In Norway, children have a legal right to 13 years of free education; schooling starts at age 6. The school system is divided into primary (1–7), lower-secondary (8–10), and upper-secondary grades (11–13) and does not distinguish types of schooling in lower-secondary language arts. The focus of this study is on the first year of lower-secondary school (Grade 8; ages 13–14). The 178 lessons in the present study are from Norwegian LA classrooms, the mother tongue subject (L1) in Norway. Of all subjects, LA accounts for the largest number of lessons—approximately five per week—throughout secondary school. LA in Norway is not systematically divided into, for example, reading, writing, vocabulary, and so on. Rather, these elements are integrated into one subject taught during a regular block at each school.

The Norwegian national curriculum is being renewed (the renewed curriculum will be implemented in 2020), with an ambition to be more attuned to the students' futures. Both the Knowledge Promotion from 2006 and the renewed curriculum define reading as a "key competence." While reading competence should be developed

across all subjects, the Norwegian LA subject explicitly bears a particular responsibility when it comes to developing students' reading competence. After year 10 (the last year of lower-secondary school), this includes competences regarding (1) *Written communication* (reading and writing), such as reading and analyzing a wide selection of texts in different genres and presenting possible interpretations, recognizing the literary devices, and using some of them in their own texts as well as using model texts to write different types of texts (creative, informative, reflective, and persuasive texts); and (2) cultural aspects in *Language, literature, and culture*, such as presenting themes and modes of expression in key contemporary and classical texts in Norwegian literature, commenting on how society, values, and ways of thinking are portrayed in texts translated from other languages, and describing the interaction between aesthetic devices in texts. The curriculum gives equal weight to fiction and non-fiction. With regard to fiction, excerpts from literary works—scenes from plays, chapters from novels—have, as part of a long-standing practice of using literature anthologies, dominated and continue to dominate literature instruction (Skaug & Blikstad-Balas, in press; Skjelbred, Askeland, Maagerø, & Aamotsbakken, 2017; Penne, 2012). Earlier curricula have, with varying explicitness, listed certain authors and/or literary works as obligatory (Pieper et al., 2007), but since 2006, the curriculum has not included an official list of recommended authors or texts.

4. METHODS

Research design. This study is part of the large-scale video study Linking Instruction and Student Achievement (LISA), funded by the Research Council of Norway through an FRIPRO-grant (see Klette, Blikstad-Balas & Roe, 2017, for overall research design). The research team, which includes several research assistants, collected data from 47 different eighth-grade LA classrooms (13- to 14-year-old students) across 45 different schools in Norway. Data collection took place in the 2014/15 school year.

A key aspect of the LISA project is the video-recording of naturally occurring instruction (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Hassan et al., 2005) to gain insight into everyday classroom practices across many different lessons and teachers. While we acknowledge that all teaching in school is institutionalized and culturally embedded (and not something that just naturally happens), a clear goal of the LISA study was to observe a large number of lessons without prompting teachers to do specific things, which is what we mean when labeling the instruction “naturally occurring.” This approach stands in contrast to experimental and quasi-experimental designs as well as to qualitative case studies, in which teachers have been encouraged to read, for example, a particular novel. An obvious limitation of our design is that we cannot know anything about how teachers who do not use literature at all during the four lessons we record would typically approach literature. However, we do believe that the approach is highly relevant for studying how all the literary texts identified across classrooms are embedded in LA lessons.

In addition to these video recordings, the project also collected digital copies of texts and artifacts used in instruction, such as pictures of assignments written on the board, handouts given to students, examples of students' work, and relevant texts from the classroom walls. We recorded four consecutive LA lessons in each classroom, totaling 178 lessons.

Understanding the roles of literature in education requires examining not only texts but also how texts are integrated into classroom instruction as they are "reconstructed in interaction" (Wade & Moje, 2000, p. 615). Video observation has proven useful as a method for systematic analysis of situated classroom practice (Blikstad-Balas, 2017; Klette, 2009; Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010; Snell, 2011), as it allows systematic investigation of how literary texts are introduced, contextualized, read, discussed, and referenced later in lessons. It has proven particularly relevant in studies of how texts are used across different school contexts (Blikstad-Balas & Sørvik, 2015; Sørvik, 2015). Previously, only small-scale qualitative or design studies have used video observation of literature instruction in Nordic classrooms. Thus, an aim of the present study is to contribute more general insight into not only how often or how much students read in school but also the nature of their interaction with literature and how literary texts are interpreted and used.

The video design relied on two fixed cameras, the smallest possible to minimize interference in the classroom (e.g. vom Lehn & Heath, 2007), simultaneously recording each lesson: one capturing the class and one focusing on the teacher. Two microphones were used at all times, one placed on the teacher and one fixed to capture the class. This provided reasonably good audio of both whole-class discourse and teacher interactions with one or a few students when working individually, in pairs, or in groups. Both situations are important when investigating the roles of literary texts in classrooms, as some instruction occurs in a whole-class scenario, while questions and individual guidance may be provided to one or a few students.

Participants. The participating schools were sampled to include demographic and geographic variety and various levels of student achievement (based on high, medium, and low gains on national reading tests measured in the eighth and ninth grades). The teachers who participated in the study vary in age and years of teaching experience. A majority (79%) of the participating teachers are female. This is slightly above the overall national gender imbalance among LA teachers in Norwegian lower-secondary schools (64% female teachers; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). Teachers' training in terms of professional development courses also varies. Overall, the sample provides a reflection of the national variation in socioeconomic status, geography, and both achievement at intake and achievement gains on the national reading test.

Ethical considerations. Written and informed participation consent was provided by parents, students, and teachers, in accordance with Norwegian Centre for Research Data ethics guidelines. Teachers did not receive specific information about how we would analyze the data, but they were fully informed that the overall goal of the LISA study is to obtain new insights on everyday classroom practices. In cases

where students did not consent to being recorded, a “blind zone” was established, where students could be seated outside of the camera’s scope. All schools are hereafter referred to by school number (from School 1 to School 47).

Analytical procedures. The analytical approach consisted of three stages, which are briefly outlined in Figure 1. As emphasized by Creswell and Creswell (2018), data analyses in qualitative studies typically involve various steps and simultaneous procedures whereby researchers systematically narrow and aggregate data over several iterations of analysis:

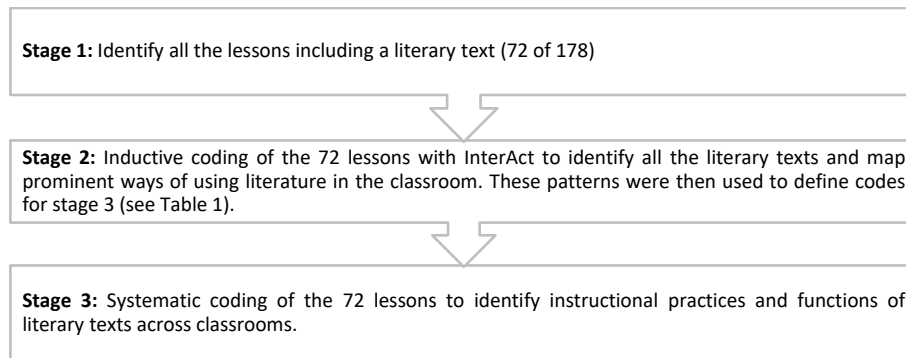


Figure 1. Stages of analysis.

Stage 1. The first analysis stage consisted of identifying which of the 178 lessons included literary texts of any kind. This is a typical way of “winnowing the data” in a large data corpus (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Literary texts were broadly defined as fictional texts, such as poems, short stories, comics, plays, and novels. This initial stage aimed at excluding all lessons in which students were not reading and/or working with a literary text at some point. Two approaches were used to validate the identification of literary texts. First, the first author systematically viewed each recorded lesson. Second, team members carefully reviewed the original logs from on-site data collection, kept by research assistants and members of the research team; these logs required researchers to label the activities taking place during the recording, and “Reading literature” is one of the listed categories in the logs. These two overlapping approaches resulted in the exclusion of 106 (of 178) lessons in 17 (of 47) classrooms from further analyses.

Stage 2. The second stage aimed to generate a description of the material in the remaining 72 lessons (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) by systematically mapping and describing features of literature use across the classrooms. We conducted and organized these analyses using InterAct software. Stage 2 thus relied on both *expected codes* (e.g., silent reading) and codes developed to precisely describe activities in the data that could not have been anticipated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Stage 3. Drawing on the rich descriptions from stage 2, a set of codes (see Table 1) describing prominent roles of literature across classrooms was developed and used for qualitative analyses of the 72 included lessons, thus segmenting prominent literary practices into the pre-defined categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) developed in stage 2. Practices were rather similar across classrooms in terms of instruction, activities, and stated purposes, so coding was rather straightforward.

In the coding of different ways of using literary texts, the identified practices and functions were not mutually exclusive, and as the results will show, several lessons incorporated more than one way of using literature. The codes presented in Table 1 were used to categorize instructional practices and the different roles of literary texts in instruction. We identified typical features and transcribed portions of video-recordings to provide illustrative and transparent examples through which to present the findings.

The design of the present study is limited in that it cannot capture every interaction with literature in a particular class over a longer period of time, as the material only covers four lessons from each classroom. In this sense, the data are not representative of the literature instructional practices of each participating teacher, which is, as mentioned, especially important for those teachers who did not utilize literary texts during the four recorded lessons. However, our study does provide a good overview of the use of literary texts across these classrooms, and the similarities across classrooms support the suggestion that the data are rather typical for LA teaching in Norwegian 8th grade classrooms.

Due to the design of the study, which includes all instruction in which students read or talk about a literary text, it is also relevant to highlight that not all occasions when a literary text is read are intended to be *literature instruction*, considering the many functions a text, be it literary or not, could have in LA instruction.

Table 1. Coding schema for instructional practices and functions of literary texts in instruction.

| Instructional practices and functions of texts | |
|--|---|
| 1 Genre instruction^a | Instruction focused on the genre characteristics of literary texts, where the instruction and/or activities have a rigorous focus on genre characteristics, literary devices, and general text features; often related to students' writing |
| Function of texts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Used to illustrate genre features and literary devices b) Used as a model text for students' writing c) Used as a starting point or inspiration for student writing |
| 2 Sustained silent reading | Instruction where students read literary texts individually, without interruptions, in self-selected books |
| Functions of texts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Framed as "pleasure reading" b) Precedes a book presentation or book report (see section 3 in this coding scheme) c) Has no explicit role |
| 3 Book presentations and book reports | Instruction where students explicitly draw on their sustained silent reading of literary texts to either (a) give oral book presentations in class or (b) write book reports |
| Functions of texts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Used to assess students' ability to talk or write about something they have read b) Used as material for practicing oral presentation skills |
| 4 Literary classroom discussions | Instruction where students are engaged in group or whole-class discussions about literary texts, with opportunities to actively use texts by citing specific features or evidence to build an understanding of the specific text |
| Functions of texts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Used as the grounds for literary discussions b) Used as evidence for students' interpretations of the text |

^a The term "genre instruction" refers to how teachers conceptualized and labeled their instruction (e.g., Teacher, School 8: "Today we are going to learn about short stories"; Teacher, School 39: "Today's lesson will be about short stories. [...] now we are digging into genre features"), how this was operationalized in the classroom through a consistent focus on genre characteristics, and how it was then defined, described, and coded in the analysis.

5. RESULTS

At some point during the four consecutive lessons recorded in each classroom, over half of the teachers engaged their students in reading literary texts at least once, as the 72 (of 178) LA lessons containing at least one literary text stem from 29 (of 47) different classrooms. Literary texts from a variety of genres were used across the classrooms, including poems, song lyrics, short stories, and novels. An overwhelming majority (74 of 86) of the literary works students read were from textbooks and other pedagogical material designed for LA courses. These textbooks typically include a variety of literary works, often followed by assignments and a short biography of the author of each text. They are not devoted solely to literature; rather, they cover a range of LA topics, including grammar, writing, literary periods, and rhetorical analysis. Whole novels were (with one exception) not read as part of the shared instruction in any of the LA classrooms but were read solely during individual silent reading. Short excerpts of novels (a couple of sentences or a paragraph) were embedded in shared instruction. In the 17 classrooms not evidencing literary texts, students were often reading non-fiction (Magnusson, Roe, & Blikstad-Balas, 2018), usually in combination with writing (Blikstad-Balas, Roe, & Klette, 2018).

In our analysis, we identified that the dominant instructional practices across the 72 lessons containing literary texts were (a) instruction about specific genres, genre features, and literary devices, (b) sustained silent reading, (c) written or oral presentations of books read in SSR, and (d) literary classroom discussions (see Figure 2). Instructional practices and text functions are often closely related and have unclear boundaries (learning about a specific genre, for example, could be the purpose for reading or a function of a text in various teaching practices); nonetheless, the practices were rather similar across classrooms, and these four practices stood out as distinct and prevalent.

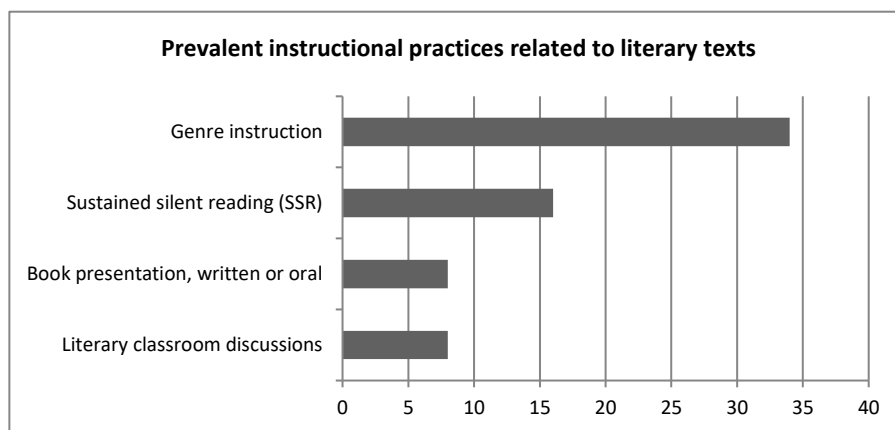


Figure 2. Prevalent instructional practices in lessons containing literary texts ($N = 72$).

While these practices were the most prevalent across lessons and classrooms, in a few instances literary texts were used for other purposes, such as to exemplify literary periods when discussing literary history, for oral training (e.g., in a lesson where students read a poem aloud to practice oral reading and speaking skills), or to practice reading Norwegian Nynorsk, a secondary written language for many students in the study. However, there were few such cases, and the clear majority of text practices were distinctly part of the four functions shown in Figure 2. The following sections elaborate on these practices and present typical empirical examples of each approach.

Genre Instruction—Instruction on genre characteristics and literary devices. Across classrooms, we observed a strong emphasis on general genre features when teachers and students talked about literature. The term “genre instruction” used in this study refers to how the teachers conceptualized and labeled their instruction, such as “Today we are going to learn about short stories” (Teacher, School 8) and “Today’s lesson will be about short stories. [...] now we are digging into genre features” (Teacher, School 39), and how this was operationalized in the classroom through a strong genre discourse. In 34 of the lessons in which students read and worked with literary texts, the practices were strongly connected to learning about genres and genre features, and the function of the text was almost exclusively to serve as an example or model within a specific genre and illustrate the use of literary devices, thus contributing to generic text competence relevant and transferable to other texts in the same genre.

For example, in most lessons (21 of 27) in which students read and worked on tasks related to short stories, the related instruction focused on how short stories are built up, aspects of characters, conflict, turning points, and literary devices typically associated with the genre, such as expanding the moment, foreshadowing, and “show don’t tell.” Similarly, in lessons containing instruction on genre aspects of poems, the main focus was on literary components, such as metaphors, contrasts, and symbols. In School 4, the teacher lectured about poetry and literary devices used in poetry. The students were given a handout containing a variety of poems and one or two generic assignments for each poem, such as looking for and underlining the contrasts. In the teacher’s lecture, contrast was framed as a key element in poetry as a genre, and the effects of contrasts were emphasized. When working with the actual poems, the students did not talk about why or how the contrasts they underscored were used in these particular passages or poems; rather, the discourse centered on contrasts as a general feature of poems. The teacher summed up the activity with the following: “You are very good at recognizing contrast now—you know how to find them” (Teacher, School 4).

At no point in this lesson, in which students read and worked with 17 different poems in the handouts and on the teacher’s board, did the students discuss specific features of a particular poem, such as the theme or meaning, the feelings portrayed, the rhythm, or other non-generic features, nor did they talk about their own reactions to the poems they read. The literary texts were read as examples of what

characterizes poems in general, without attention to the distinguished features of each particular poem and its content.

One might ask why the intensive focus on generic features of each genre and specific literary devices found in different texts, and the answer could lie in the function of the texts in these lessons: typically, the instruction accompanying literary texts was strongly related to students' own writing, both in practical ways (e.g., students were expected to make use of the literary devices they had learned about in their own texts) and in terms of how the instruction was framed and justified by teachers. The writing was not analytical in terms of students writing about a text they read. Students' own writing was strongly emphasized whenever there was a genre focus, and if students did not write within the specific lesson, there was a stated goal of producing texts in the particular genre at some future time. Across classrooms, students' writing was explicitly mentioned by teachers as an explanation for why they were working with literary texts.

A common way of using literary texts in genre-based writing instruction across classrooms was to show students how they could use literary devices in their own writing: "To know how to build a story" (Teacher, School 9). Another example of such practice is a lesson in School 25 in which students were reading about literary devices in their textbook in preparation for an upcoming writing day. One by one, the students read aloud from the textbook passages about literary devices and excerpts from short stories and novels illustrating the different literary devices. The excerpts did not include titles or authors; they were simply illustrations of genre characteristics.

In 20 of the 27 lessons where the instruction focused on short stories, students were required to be aware of the aforementioned genre features and literary devices, with the justification that they should use them in their own writing. The example below illustrates a typical practice in the classrooms: the teacher starts by introducing the genre rather than the specific literary text students are going to read and then discusses general aspects of the genre and literary devices common to the genre. As we can already see in the introduction of this lesson, the teacher justifies the focus on genre as a way to learn how to write within that particular genre:

Teacher, School 39: Today's lesson will be about short stories. We are going to learn to write a new genre. We have talked about it before and read a couple of short stories, but now we are digging into genre features [sjangertrekk]. [...] Is there anyone who can tell what a genre is?

Student: It is a special recipe to write within a genre, a certain way to write.

Teacher: Correct: Something that is special for this way of writing.

The teacher explains that a short story is a genre of its own, with its own features, and that certain elements must be present to call it a short story:

Teacher: There are few people in the story. It takes place in one setting, in a short period of time. This is because it is brief. We cannot tell about the main character and three secondary characters and his neighbor and that boy's aunt, because then we get

too much going on in the text. You are supposed to prolong the moments. With a short period of time, we mean that the plot will not take place over weeks, months, or years, but more like just a part of a day. At most a day maybe. (Teacher, School 39)

In the quote above, it becomes even more evident that the emphasis is on writing rather than reading short stories, as the teacher not only talks about what other authors typically do in short stories but also addresses the students in their upcoming role of writers of short stories, with the imperative “You are supposed to prolong the moments.” Across classrooms, the short stories students read were referred to as examples as well as serving as models to learn about genre features and literary elements students are expected to use in their own writing, as in the exchange in School 39 shown above. Another example of how short stories are used to illustrate a particular genre in genre instruction comes from School 7, where the students read a non-authentic example text of a short story that was explicitly written as a textbook illustration of short-story structure and modeled the literary devices one would expect to find in a short story.

Literary texts also served as starting points for students’ own writing in a number of ways in several classrooms. In School 11, students read “The Landlady,” a short story by Roald Dahl about a young man who stops at a bed and breakfast where increasingly creepy events transpire, with a specific focus on how and why the short story is exciting. Students are then asked to write their own horror story, starting with descriptions of a specific location for the plot. The text is thus used as inspiration for the students’ own text. Other ways of using texts in writing instruction included finishing a short story where the students had *not* read the end or filling in parts of a poem. In one class, students were asked to rewrite excerpts from a novel as dialog because they “need to know how to write a dialog” (Teacher, School 5). In another class (School 35), the students read a short story aloud together then individually rewrote the story as a newspaper article, finally discussing their own texts and the content of their articles.

Many of these examples show purposeful, good writing instruction (Blikstad-Balas, Roe, & Klette, 2018), and some of the approaches and assignments require active use of the texts, which is likely to give the students a better understanding of the texts. Among the lessons with a firm focus on genre and student writing are examples of classroom discussions and student–teacher talk about particular works of literature being read, but this was not as common as the exclusive use of texts to illustrate genre or as starting points for writing.

Sustained silent reading. In 16 lessons (11 schools), students silently read self-selected books. This seemed to be an integrated practice within these classrooms, following typical SSR practices: students read a book brought from home or borrowed from the school library for about 15 minutes at the beginning or end of the LA lesson. There was rarely any stated purpose for the reading, with the exception of one teacher who labeled it “pleasure reading” (Teacher, School 5).

The typical pattern of SSR was for the teacher to ask the students to find their book, and then students read silently at their desks. The teacher either sat in front

of the class or walked around asking students questions like “What book are you reading now?” (School 14), “Why did you choose that book?” (School 23), and “Would you recommend it to someone else?” (School 5). Some teachers also helped students find new books after finishing one—“Maybe you want to take this book, if you like that kind of book?” (School 40)—but it was up to the students to choose for themselves. Across classrooms, this silent reading was unrelated to the content of the rest of the lessons. After individual reading, the lesson shifted to something else, for example, grammar exercises or a mini-writing lesson, without any shared discourse or references to the reading or the books read.

A key finding regarding the individual silent reading is that, with the exception of one classroom, it was the only practice in which students read whole novels. Apart from the superficial questions about the books students were reading, these books were not discussed in class at the time of reading. Little or no attention was given to literary features or qualities, and during silent reading time, students had few or no guidelines on how they should be reading or what they should pay attention to when reading whole pieces of literature on their own.

Book presentations and book reports. In two different classes, students gave oral book presentations based on books read individually for SSR, and in five classrooms, students wrote book reports or kept logs (not literary analyses) of their reading time. Adding this to the 16 SSR lessons, there was instruction related to students’ individual reading in 19 lessons.

For book presentations, students stood in front of the class and presented a novel they had read by naming the title, the author, and sometimes the year the book was published as well as the writer’s year of birth. Most students said something about the main characters and gave a superficial summary of the plot. They typically told their classmates whether they personally enjoyed the book, and some suggested who they would recommend it to. A student in School 34, for instance, had read the American young adult novel *Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Happy Heartbreaker* by Rachel Renée Russell. After giving a short synopsis of the plot, she summed up:

The language is very girly. I have not read the whole book yet, but I like it this far. I think it is appropriate for 10 to 14 years old, and I would recommend it to all girls, because it is a typical girl novel. (Student, School 34)

A key finding regarding the book presentations was that the feedback on the presentations, given by both peers and teachers, focused primarily on oral presentation skills rather than the presentation content. In School 34, oral feedback was given by both students and teacher immediately after the presentations, with encouraging comments such as:

¹ In School 12, the students were preparing a group presentation based on a Norwegian young adult novel they had read together called *Pitbull Terje går amok* [*Pitbull-Terje goes wild*] by Endre Lund Eriksen.

"You spoke loud and clearly." (Student 1)

"Good contact with the audience." (Student 2)

"This presentation was even better than the one you had last autumn." (Student 3)

"A great engagement and radiance, and you had practiced well, thus, you had the audience in your hands. Great job, continue like this!" (Teacher, School 34)

Furthermore, the teacher commented on the supportive climate and the student's courage in standing up in front of the class: "This is so nice! You smile, take good care of each other, and listen with enthusiasm. It is truly wonderful." The teacher in school 10 also talked about the importance of a supportive climate, encouraging students to give positive feedback to make it less scary to stand in front of the class for the first time. The specified learning aim for language arts in the students' weekly plan during the week of book presentations was as follows: *Week plan, School 10: Comment on positive features of your own and others' presentations. Give advice on how to improve your own and others' presentations. Participate constructively in developing criteria.* Throughout the lessons, the teacher in School 10 gave verbal feedback and asked both process-oriented questions like "Did you find the book easy to read?" and more investigative questions like "Did you feel that you got to know the characters?" inviting students to elaborate on their presentations. However, these questions were answered briefly and superficially, for example "Yes, it was written a bit about them, where they were born and such" (student).

In addition to the oral book presentations, we found that teachers talked about written book reports, which followed the same criteria as the presentations, asking students to present the book and its author, describe the main characters, summarize the plot, and write something about whether they liked the book or not. Some classes had a substantial focus on the authors, such as in School 36, where the teacher encouraged the students to contact "their" authors after searching for email addresses and phone numbers. When discussing what kind of questions they should ask, the teacher advised them to ask about everything: "Then you will at least get some answers" (Teacher, School 36). Other teachers had a rigorous focus on the writing process, such as in School 14, where the main emphasis was on technical aspects of writing, like headings and capitalization.

Literary classroom discussions. In eight lessons in seven different classrooms, the students were engaged in extended classroom discussions about literary texts. These eight lessons stand out in the material due to a combination of the key role of the text in the instruction and students' opportunity to engage in discussions about the text itself using both experiential and analytical approaches, in which form and content were seen as interrelated.

There was little focus on right and wrong answers in these discussions; students' ideas and interpretations of and reactions to the texts were welcome and encouraged. A common thread across these lessons was that the instruction corresponded with what Applebee et al. (2003, p. 691) referred to as "discussion-based approaches," wherein the instruction emphasized students as capable of substantially

contributing to the joint understanding of literature, instructional activities that involved genuine conversations about literary texts, a focus on developing rather than testing understanding, as well as encouraging multiple perspectives to enrich understanding instead of relying on consensus interpretations.

The literary discussions were predominantly based on short stories read in class. In all the classrooms in which students talked about a literary text, the text was read in class, either silently or read aloud by the teacher or multiple students. Homework or preparations, like reading ahead for class, were never required, giving all students the opportunity to participate in the discussion. Some teachers made an effort to make these reading situations positive encounters with texts, such as the teacher who arranged for a comfy lesson and gathered the class in a circle in an open space in the classroom to read and talk about the short story “Grandpa Is a Cane” by Johan Borgen:

What I am going to do today is read you a story. That is why you have brought pillows. Now I want you to give attention to the feelings of why this is a nice story. (Teacher, School 24)

In this class (School 24), the students read, discussed, and worked on tasks related to the short story, the author, literary devices, and genre features (both text-specific and general) for four consecutive lessons. Half of the lessons containing literary classroom discussion across classrooms were part of a comprehensive instructional design, where students read and worked with the same text and/or author or theme (e.g., identity) for several consecutive LA lessons. Some of these designs were identified as premade frameworks developed at the National Reading Center and National Center for Education in Norwegian Nynorsk, and the teachers seemed to adjust the designs to fit their instruction, timeframe, and students.

As previously described, there was a strong genre discourse across classrooms, and this was also the case in the lessons with literary discussions. Four of the eight lessons that included literary discussions overlapped with a strong focus on genre, and three of those four lessons focused on students’ writing. The difference between these lessons and those with genre instruction focusing primarily on general aspects of texts is that the particular texts read were the main focus of the activities and discussions. However, teachers who facilitated extended literary discussions also typically framed the instruction as genre instruction, for example, “Today we are going to learn about short stories” (Teacher, School 8), and when explaining the purpose for reading and talking about literature, these teachers emphasized knowledge about genre and students’ writing, both in their framing and instructional focuses. In School 20, the class worked with the short story “Raude kyssemerke i brev” [Red kiss marks in letters] by Jon Fosse for four consecutive lessons (in one of the identified premade frameworks mentioned above), including various individual, group, and whole-class activities. Here is how the teacher introduced the upcoming activities for the students in the first recorded lesson:

We have been working with comic strips and their terminology for a while. Now we are going to work with [the genre] short story. My plan is that we are going to be able to use knowledge of both comics and short stories later. A short story is a story with special criteria. We are going to read a short story and talk about it and compare how comics and short stories are similar and dissimilar. (Teacher, School 20)

The teacher continued to emphasize generic text features throughout all four lessons. However, in the discussions and activities throughout the lessons, students were required to analyze, discuss, and reflect on both the form and content. After reading the text together and ensuring that all the students had a basic understanding of the story, the teacher introduced conventional literary devices used in short stories, using the opportunity to analyze “Red Kiss Marks in Letters” step by step and asking the students about literary devices in general and how they were implemented in this specific text. This instruction stood in contrast to the genre practice in many classrooms, as the teacher and students in this class (School 20) applied their newly acquired knowledge about typical features and literary devices in short stories to the specific text they were reading. The instruction balanced the analytic approach, giving students a vocabulary to analyze and talk about the specific texts and literature in general, and a more experiential approach, giving students opportunities to express feelings and thoughts about what they read. They also talked about the value of reading fiction and how fiction is often about significant life experiences, such as falling in love, which is how they interpret the short story together and discuss the intention of the story:

Teacher (School 20): What is the purpose of this short story? To affect? Entertain? Tell? Or challenge?

Student 1: I think only to tell.

Teacher: Yes, to tell about something important.

Student 2: Maybe to affect, having the end in mind.

Teacher: Yes, what happens in the end?

Student 3: She dies.

Teacher: Then, what does he [the narrator] want to say?

Student 4: Love does not last forever.

Student 5: Love to death do us part.

Teacher: “Love to death do us part,” a little dramatic?

Student 6: To teach us that everybody dies.

Teacher: Memento mori. Maybe you are on to something. What if he had told her that he was in love with her earlier?

Student 7: And then she died?

Teacher: Maybe something else would have happened? Maybe she was not hit by that car? Maybe it says something about seizing the moment before it is too late?

Not considering the content, the outline of this classroom talk was typical of the discussion format across classrooms. In all lessons with classroom discussions, the teacher led the discussion, often following a traditional initiate–respond–evaluate (IRE) pattern, where the teacher holds a question-and-answer session about the text’s form, content, or theme. A few teachers gave lectures concluding with analyses of short stories (which were not counted as literary classroom discussions). In the lessons with extended literary discussions, questions tended to be open-ended, and students’ voices and interpretations were given more attention.

In School 36, students read the lyrics of “Du skal få en dag i måra” [You’ll Get a New Day Tomorrow] by Alf Prøysen, a song about a boy who has various worries throughout life and finds comfort in listening to the whispering of the pine trees and their promises about new opportunities to come. The students and teacher discussed contrasts in the lyrics, such as the difference between the hard reality of today and bright hopes for tomorrow and the gap between what the boy tries to achieve and what he does. This was followed by further discussions about the boy, the story, themes, feelings, literary features, and experiences with disappointments in life and ease in nature. Throughout the discussion, the teacher encouraged students to give and account for their views and interpretations:

Student, School 36: The boy has many wounds.

Teacher: Oh!? Internal or external?

Student: Both. He lives near the forest, and getting wounds is part of childhood.

Teacher: That is an impressive interpretation!

Even though there was both opportunity for and uptake of students’ talk and responses in several classrooms, most discussions were between the teacher and the students, as in the examples above, rather than among students. Across classrooms and lessons, there was little evidence of students building on or challenging each other’s arguments; communication was through the teacher. Even though the teachers did not focus on right and wrong answers in literary discussions, the tendency was toward teacher-directed interpretation and exploration of the texts, most evidently in the lessons focusing on genre and writing.

Regarding the lessons that included comprehensive literary discussions with active students, the analyses suggest that the teachers persistently adjusted their focus and questions base on students’ understanding of and reflections about what they read. In one classroom (School 8), the students read the short story “Rolla” [The Role] by Maja Røkenes Myren, about a young boy playing a character in a movie. Both the protagonist and the character he plays, who are both secretly homosexual, struggle with feelings about sexuality and how others see them. Some of the students were Norwegian language learners and did not understand quite simple vocabulary, such as “alarm-red jacket,” “spotlight,” “work out,” and “moment.” The teacher used the opportunity to talk about these words and their meanings in relation to the theme,

as symbols or words with specific importance, in ways that allowed the students to discuss both the meaning of the words and the text itself.

6. DISCUSSION

The benefits of reading literature—be they imaginative potential, critical power, or the ability to relate to other people, cultures, or times—certainly require socialization into the ways of making sense of literary meaning and values. According to a vast number of previous studies, the extent and degree of children’s opportunities to engage with literary texts at home vary greatly (e.g., Heath, 1982; Wazik & Van Horn, 2012). Therefore, meetings between students and literary texts orchestrated by competent school teachers have become ever more important.

The main contribution of the present study is to explore the practices and functions by which adolescents are socialized into literary reading in school. Through the four consecutive LA lessons recorded in 47 classrooms, the study provides an exhaustive look into how literature is used, justified, and framed in education.

Furthermore, the study reveals that literature instruction and literary reading in Norwegian 8th grade LA classrooms engages students in four main basic practices. First, reading literature is largely framed within a general genre discourse: texts are more often used to exemplify generic traits, not to go deeply into the literary interpretations and qualities of each specific text. Second, literature is used for individual silent reading; students are free to choose their own books, but the reading is only rarely related to explicit instruction. Third, in some cases, individual silent reading leads to a book report or oral presentation, an instructional practice focused as much on presentation skills as on the book that was read. Fourth, and finally, literature instruction includes a smaller degree of literary discussion, focused on developing and enriching students’ understanding of particular works of literature. In the following, implications of the instructional practices are discussed before turning back to the rather surprising finding that literature is so rarely framed as aesthetic or valuable in and of itself.

Generic discourse and narrow criteria for choices of texts. The main trend observed in this study is that literary texts are framed within a strong genre discourse, where the shared features of texts within the same genre are emphasized to a degree that overshadows the actual literary texts. By highlighting literary devices and features of various genres, instructors teach students how to recognize literary compositions and provide them with tools for when students are asked to produce their own texts in the same genre. The texts used in the shared instruction across the material are easily placed within conventional genre categories, and almost all the teachers explicitly categorized the literature read in class as belonging to a particular genre. The strong emphasis on the genre itself leads to two interrelated questions: First, what are the implications of the dominance of the genre focus with regard to choosing literary texts for LA classes? One main concern is that if teachers always emphasize genre strongly, and if they are concerned with demonstrating

conventional generic traits, is there a danger that texts that do not fit the criteria—and thus do not fit the established genre discourse—will be systematically excluded from the classroom? None of the texts read or discussed in any of the classrooms broke away from the genre criteria; rather, teachers explicitly drew students' attention to typical features of the specific genre read in that particular lesson. An approach like this may systematically exclude contemporary texts that challenge conventional genre rules as well as older texts that are not in harmony with these criteria, even though both contemporary and classical texts are mentioned in the curriculum. The example of the short story purposefully written for the textbook pinpoints this very well. The textbook authors constructed this text as a perfect example of a short story for educational purposes only to serve as a model text that perfectly fit the conventional short-story criteria. In such a case, one must ask the second question, whether the failure to identify any existing short story as a good enough fit to the strict criteria actually show that textbook publishers and teachers may be overemphasizing genre when reading literature in the classroom. If no authentic work of literature fits the criteria, then perhaps the criteria are too narrow. We would like to point to the fact that several short stories authored by acclaimed and internationally recognized writers would fail to meet the genre criteria the students are taught in this material.

While we raise some concerns about the way literary works seem to be reduced to starting points for students' own writing, we strongly emphasize that we are not in any way opposing genre instruction per se or the combination of teaching reading and writing. There are several excellent reasons to combine reading and writing instruction (Graham & Hebert, 2010, 2011; Schneuwly, Thévenaz-Christen, Trevisi, & Daghé, 2017), and literary texts may very well be used as examples or illustrations in genre and/or writing instruction. Teaching students about genre features and literary devices can help them develop linguistic and rhetorical competence, thereby enabling them to express themselves and build deeper understanding when talking, thinking, and writing about literature. Talking about genre when discussing literature is highly relevant, and we realize that knowledge about different genres could be highly relevant in a conversation about a specific literary text, especially if the text in question actually challenged genre conventions (and to recognize such aspects, students would need extensive knowledge about genre). Furthermore, a shared subject-specific language is an important part of the disciplinary discourse (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) in the LA discipline as well, making it possible for students to sharpen their shared thinking about literary works and literary meaning-making. Purposely modeled literary texts play an obvious role in such a learning process. The same is true for literature read and used to support students' writing development. Yet, while genre instruction has an important and justified place in writing instruction (Blikstad-Balas et al., 2018; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), it is essential to ask whether this approach should be equally important in literature instruction, exceeding the importance of the works of literature read and directing both how and what students read in school.

Keeping in mind that the data material in this study also covered lessons/instruction where there seemed to be learning goals other than literary understanding, we want to highlight that our concern is not about literature being used in, for example, genre instruction or as a starting point for student's writing, but that the focus on literature itself is limited. If the material in our study reflects all the lessons in which writing was the main goal and literary texts happened to play a role in that, where are all the reading lessons with the goal of making sense of literature? The proportion of literary works used for genre instruction and student writing implies a narrow use of literary. The stories themselves, the reasons for telling them, and the cultural and historical backgrounds and themes that they symbolize, disentangle, or explain to us as readers are all lost beneath the importance of the particular genre the text represents or—even more disquieting—what particular features of the genre happen to be prominent in the text. In fact, in many of the lessons with the strongest emphasis on genre, the texts students read could easily have been replaced without changing the instruction or the tasks; the talk about texts is generic and exclusively linked to general features. For example, the teacher may emphasize that repetition in a poem reinforces the importance of specific content without talking about what that content is *in that particular text*. The data contain several examples of this. With such a strict focus on form, any poem with some repetition fits right into the instruction. Consequently, it would make no difference whether the students read Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Bells" or Taylor Swift's hit lyrics to "Shake It Off" if the main purpose is to learn about repetition as a genre element. Even though some of the genre activities and writing tasks identified in our data might give students a better understanding of the text under study, the actual texts are neither the focus nor the topic of classroom discussions. In conclusion, it is somewhat worrying to see that literature, across so many classrooms, seems to be reduced to a tool for achieving other learning goals. Although literary works may certainly be a part of, for example, effective writing instruction (Blikstad-Balas et al., 2018) or a basis for students' oral presentations, the teaching practices we have studied were not aimed towards building students' literary competence, engaging them in a literary experience, broadening their repertoire of aesthetic literary understanding, and so on.

Sustained silent reading: The only use of novels. However, the silent individual reading observed in our data displays a very different focus. It is labeled "pleasure reading," a time for students to choose their own texts and read uninterrupted. Indeed, scholars have emphasized students' development of literary judgment through pleasurable reading (Bertschi-Kaufmann & Graber, 2017) as well as the potential of silent individual reading of self-selected books to stimulate students' motivation and positive attitudes towards reading (Siah & Kwok, 2010; Von Sprecken & Krashen, 1998; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). It should be noted, however, that with one exception, silent individual reading is the only context in which students read novels in full rather than short excerpts. This is an important finding, suggesting that the students read few novels during their LA lessons, and if and when they do, the reading is highly individualized and part of silent reading only. Across the 178 lessons we

recorded, entire novels were not part of the shared classroom discourse, with the exception of one classroom in which the students prepared a group presentation based on a contemporary young adult novel they had read together.

While some silent reading is the basis of book presentations or reports, it is surprising to see that the genre emphasis—so strong in other situations in which students read literature—is absent. Teachers' focus on the form of presentations, rather than the content, may imply that the main purpose of presentations is practicing oral skills, not developing literary understanding. These presentations are excellent occasions to combine literature talk with presentation skills. Moreover, giving students opportunities to talk to and give feedback to each other might improve the foundation for classroom discourse in general, and sharing literary experiences might encourage students to talk about literature. Yet, silent reading seems to be the only occasion upon which students read novels, and book presentations may be the only opportunity students have to talk about and discuss larger literary works. This, in addition to the finding that book reports are largely superficial and subjective accounts, makes it timely to ask whether an opportunity is being missed to facilitate activities in which students could talk and write about books they read with a greater focus on the literature.

Literary classroom discussions. As suggested in the background and literature review section, verbal communication and classroom interaction play crucial roles in LA learning and how students talk about literature matters. Only some of the classrooms reading fiction included examples of the type of high-quality instruction that Applebee et al. (2003) referred to as discussion-based. This means that students were rarely given the opportunity to read or talk about literature with a focus on both the literary experience and the specific textural features. This becomes particularly evident in the lessons focusing on genre and writing, as the discussion touches on literary qualities, themes, and students' reactions in a way that is somehow concealed behind the genre discourse in the framing, focus, and assigned tasks.

In lessons that included literature discussions, students were asked to read, use, and talk about literature, thereby contributing to building a deeper understanding of the examined texts. Two aspects of this instructional and functional focus are of particular interest to researchers and practitioners in the field. First, across the lessons that included literature discussions, teachers and students took their time, approaching texts with various methods, foci, and perspectives. Discussions were based on both analytical readings and experiential perceptions of the text. These are models of classroom literary reading that have been emphasized in the theoretical literature (Rosenblatt, 1978; Langer, 2011) and empirically tested in experiments and design research (Applebee et al., 2003; Murphy et al., 2009; Nystrand et al., 1997). However, the more specific contributions to students' development of literary perception and sensitivity of these instructional practices when used in authentic, everyday settings have only been investigated in limited ways, and there is a need for more in-depth investigations into the potential of pedagogical practices that provide students with opportunities to explore literary works *as* literary works.

Second, concerning students' abilities and opportunities to participate in and contribute to literature discussions, as reported in the findings, the teachers primarily led the discussions and directed the interpretation and exploration of the texts. On only a few occasions did students build on or challenge each other's arguments. A discussion format like this might tie both students and teachers to roles that undermine students' trust in their own ability to understand, interpret, or challenge literary texts. Supported by counterexamples, the data in the present study—as well as previous research (see e.g. Gourvenec, 2016; Johansen, 2017; Sønneland & Skaf-tun, 2017)—show that there is reason to believe that students are quite able to handle texts of varying levels of complexity and difficulty and to maintain a discussion format building on and questioning their own and others' arguments and perspectives.

Limitations. The most obvious limitation of this study is that it provides only a snapshot of each classroom's practices. The design of the present study cannot capture everything read by a particular class over the whole school year. In this sense, the data are not representative of literature instruction by each participating teacher. However, the data do provide a good overview and glimpse into typical literary instruction practices across the 47 classrooms. Additionally, the similarities across classrooms suggest that the data are typical for LA instruction in the first year of Norwegian secondary school. While adding more classrooms and more lessons per class would likely provide more representative data, the present study remains the largest systematic observation study of literature instruction in Scandinavia to date.

Concluding remarks. The findings of the present study indicate that there is limited coherence between instruction and focus within the distinct LA instructional practices. There is also a tendency for instruction to simply try to cover as many aspects of the LA subject as possible at once. This could, of course, be a time-efficient and effective approach to student learning, as is combining instruction in reading and writing (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Still, there is a risk of teaching literacy at the expense of teaching literature. The tendency toward presenting students with short excerpts and partial texts during instruction may be hiding something else: it could be a way to cope with the vastness of the subject, which covers many issues—a way to "get through" the curriculum, perhaps at the cost of the lessons literature teaches beyond literacy.

The findings of the present study call for further research into instructional practices related to literature and language arts, both across educational levels and countries, as well as research into the role and value of literature in the language arts, and further examinations of literatures. Knowledge about how and why students read fiction is crucial when literature seems to be challenged both within and outside the classroom. Further research is also needed on the literary texts with which students are presented, including teachers' choices and reasoning concerning the use of these texts, textbook selections, and assignments related to literature excerpts, along with examinations of the position of literature in language arts textbooks, syllabuses, and curricula. Still, regardless of *what* literature students read in school, the

more fundamental issue is *how* they encounter it. The potential of literary classroom discussions and the lack of empirical research on day-to-day literature education call for in-depth investigations of how literature discussions unfold across classrooms.

The findings in this study align with concerns raised by scholars around the world about the position of literature in language arts and adds to these concerns by describing a rather reductionist use of literature. If literature is reduced to a tool for learning something else, it is hard to claim the value of literature itself and establish its position in the curriculum. There are strong arguments for why students should read in school; however, as reflected in the present study, these arguments are poorly reflected in the way in which literature is used.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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