

FUNCTION AND USE OF LITERARY TEXTS IN NORDIC SCHOOLS

ANNA NISSEN¹, MICHAEL TENGBERG¹, BIRNA MARÍA B. SVANBJÖRNSDÓTTIR², IDA L. GABRIELSEN³, MARTE BLIKSTAD-BALAS³, AND KIRSTI KLETTE³

¹ Karlstad University ² University of Akureyri ³ University of Oslo

Abstract

In this comparative study, naturally occurring literature instruction in Nordic lower secondary school is investigated in order to find out how lessons are organized, to what extent different genres are read and worked upon, and for what subject-specific functions and purposes literary texts are used. Implications for text selection by teachers are discussed. The study relies on four consecutive video-recorded language arts lessons from 102 classrooms in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The function and use of literary texts were investigated by means of video-analysis and statistical comparisons. The analysis clearly indicates that literature plays an important part in Nordic language arts education. In all four countries, narrative fiction texts were favored above other genres. When the aim was to give students joint reading experiences, short stories and excerpts from novels were normally used. Reading literature for the sake of developing comprehension appears to be a dominant function of using literary texts in Nordic lower secondary arts classrooms. The present study also suggests that it is important for Nordic teachers to provide their students with positive reading experiences.

Keywords: literature instruction; reading literature; Nordic comparisons; secondary education; video analysis
Introduction

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Corresponding author: Anna Nissen, Department of Educational Studies, Karlstad University, SE-65188 Karlstad, Sweden. Email: anna.nissen@kau.se

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By tradition, literature instruction is a natural and incontestable part of language arts education all over the world, and literature is widely considered vital to young people's personal and intellectual development (Alsup, 2015; Showalter, 2003). A range of arguments and empirical evidence support the use of literature in school: it contributes to language development, encourages good reading habits, provides readers with experiences and knowledge, impedes undemocratic values, and facilitates the understanding of others through simulation of social experience and interaction (Lamarque & Olsen, 1994; Mar & Oatley, 2008). There is, however, a risk that such ideas are perceived as established truths, and that the desired effects of reading literature are seen as instinctive and automatic (Persson, 2012). Although Schrijvers et al. (2019) found that literature instruction, under certain conditions, can develop adolescents' capacity for understanding other people, they could also see that it was not only important to choose adequate texts to read, but it was also necessary to design the right kind of tasks to help students prepare the reading experience, and to process it in writing and/or discussions after the reading.

Several studies provide valuable insight into teaching practices that are beneficial for students when it comes to reading literature. For example, we know that certain types of discussion can help shape students' comprehension of texts (Wilkinson et al., 2015), and that reading strategies can impact students' understanding of the texts they read (Block & Parris, 2008; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; The Swedish Institute for Educational Research, 2019). A key implication from previous research is that the ways texts are used will have consequences for the kind of literary competence students develop. This makes it even more important to systematically investigate how and for what purposes literary texts are made a part of instruction by teachers across contexts.

Research within the educational field has previously been dominated by small-scale studies based on various methodological and theoretical approaches (Klette et al., 2017). These studies have contributed with nuanced and useful information about classroom practices, but it has been difficult to compare results between various studies, and to measure practices over time (Klette et al., 2017). As for research on literature instruction, many studies rely on interventions and on trying out ideas launched by researchers (see e.g., Elf et al., 2019; Tengberg et al., 2015). Thus, while we may know about key features of high-quality literature instruction, we know less about how language arts teachers include literature in their everyday teaching across schools.

In the present study, we compare literature instruction in lower secondary language arts classrooms in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and we examine how and to what extent literary texts are used. We draw on video data from a research project called Linking Instruction and Student Achievement (LISA). The project was first designed and launched in Norway (Klette et al., 2017), but has expanded into a large-scale international video study (LISA Nordic) investigating the teaching quality across Nordic classrooms. In this study, we analyzed video-recorded language arts lessons from a total of 102 classrooms in lower secondary schools. Four

consecutive lessons were recorded in each classroom. During the data collection, teachers were asked to follow their ordinary lesson plan, which might (or might not) include the use of literary texts. This implies that the instruction they present vary in many different ways. Thereby, it provides a valuable insight into what goes on in language arts classrooms across the Nordic countries.

Traditionally these countries are known for high literacy rates and populations that tend to read a significant amount of fiction (Hansen, 2018; Mjøset, 2018; Sulkunen & Malin, 2018). They also share social, linguistic, and educational commonalities, and Nordic classrooms show a number of shared features when it comes to teaching and learning practices (Klette, 2018). Therefore, many similarities can be expected when literature instruction in these countries is compared, and it is reasonable to assume that differences between individual teachers and classrooms are sometimes larger within than between countries. Yet, it is beneficial to adopt a comparative perspective since national traditions and syllabi might emphasize different characteristics and different ideals of literary reading. Comparison of teachers' instruction across borders and traditions also makes it possible to notice qualities and patterns that may be difficult to discern when national practices are investigated. The aim of this study is to compare the enacted literature instruction in lower secondary language arts classrooms in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and to examine how and to what extent literary texts are used in the instruction. More specifically, the following research questions guide the study:

- 1) How are lessons organized in Nordic lower secondary literature instruction?
- 2) To what extent are different literary genres read and worked upon in the daily instruction?
- 3) For what subject-specific functions and purposes are literary texts read and worked upon?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the early 2000s, Nordic teenagers' reading habits have decreased (see e.g., Egelund, 2012; SOU, 2018; Jensen et al., 2019). However, in the period 2003-2015, the proportion of Icelandic girls who read on a daily basis increased from 13% to 18% (Þórarinsdóttir et al., 2017). Generally, girls report greater enjoyment of reading than boys (OECD, 2019), but in Iceland this difference is less pronounced than in most other countries (Þórarinsdóttir et al., 2017). PISA 2018 shows that Finnish students still perform very well when it comes to reading comprehension, but they are becoming less interested in reading (Finnish Government, 2019). Approximately 50% of the Norwegian students in the PISA-study report that they do not read in leisure hours (Jensen et al., 2019), and a similar tendency can be observed in Sweden, where fifteen-year-olds seem to be somewhat more negative towards reading than their peers in other Nordic countries (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019).

1.1 *Literature in Nordic curricula*

In Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish language arts curricula, literary texts are included in an extended notion of text, but they are also ascribed a prominent position (Gourvennec et al., 2020). Hence, it can be argued that they are given significance as something different from other texts. Gourvennec et al. (2020) draw the conclusion that although literature may have lost some of its former status in language arts, literary texts are still given significance and prominence in comparison to other text types in Nordic curricula. In the Icelandic curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014), which was not included in the analysis, “reading and literature” is presented as one of the main objectives of teaching Icelandic; and Icelandic cultural heritage, which is predominantly related to literary texts, is especially mentioned.

Different purposes of literature education are given weight in different countries, but in the curricula Gourvennec et al. (2020) analyzed, they could identify a number of similarities. For example, all four curricula highlight positive reading experiences as a justification for reading literature. Höglund (2019) found that in the new Finnish curriculum from 2014, the expectation that literature instruction can increase students’ interest in reading is even more pronounced than it was in previous curricula. She points out that in this way a reading crisis is expressed in the curriculum. Another important similarity between the four curricula is that they all state that reading literature can contribute to personal growth and identity formation (Gourvennec et al., 2020). However, the curricula do not make it exactly clear how work on literary texts is supposed to bring about this development, which, according to Gourvennec et al. (2020), will leave teachers in a challenging and interpretative position. They infer that this can lead to a situation where teachers turn towards concrete and measurable aspects of the curriculum. Lundström et al. (2011) note that it is easier to measure what students learn *about* literature than it is to measure what they learn *from* literature. Therefore, teachers might prioritize formal aspects in their literature instruction.

1.2 *Nordic literature instruction*

Different traditions influence how literature is read and interpreted in a school context (Johansson, 2015; Torell, 2002). In Scandinavian (i.e., Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish) classroom research, experience-based, reader-oriented approaches have been common, whereas there have been few studies focusing on students’ analytical work with literary texts (Rødnes, 2014). When it comes to classroom teaching and learning practices on a general level, comparative classroom analyses have shown that there are many similarities across the Nordic countries (Klette, 2018). On the other hand, factors such as curricula, textbooks, and traditions influence teachers’ instruction (Lundström et al., 2011; Mossberg Schüllerqvist, 2008; Rørbech &

Skyggebjerg, 2020), which entails that students in different countries are taught different subject content in different ways.

There are few studies investigating literature instruction across the Nordic countries, but we know that literary texts are explicitly and specifically mentioned in all Nordic curricula (Gourvenec et al., 2020; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). There is, however, a difference in how these documents address questions about the origin of literary texts. Whereas the Norwegian and Swedish curricula stress the importance of reading literature from different parts of the world, there is an implicit norm emphasizing national literature in the Danish curriculum, where there is also a literary canon of Danish/Scandinavian authorship (Gourvenec et al., 2020). Yet, teachers are principally free to decide what literary texts to use in their classrooms, and also to what extent literary texts will be used (Gourvenec et al., 2020). Finland has two national languages, and even though goals and content in language arts are the same for both Finnish speaking and Swedish speaking students, there are minor disparities concerning linguistic and cultural characteristics (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 289). In the Icelandic curriculum, much emphasis is put on the importance of reading skills on a general level, but the curriculum also states that students should read Icelandic as well as foreign literature (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014)

Scandinavian language arts teachers' bases for the legitimation of their subject seem to be very much the same (Ulfgard, 2012). In interviews, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish teachers working in upper secondary school pointed out reading literature and developing linguistic skills as two key areas of the subject. Communication, reflection, and personality development were other issues that they considered important (Ulfgard, 2012). In assignments connected to literary texts in Norwegian textbooks, students are often invited to interpret the text, and to express their personal experiences (Bakken & Andersson-Bakken, 2016). According to Penne (2012), Scandinavian teachers strive to create positive experiences through reading, and students' individual interpretations of literary texts are by and large respected. In a more recent study, Tengberg (2019) found that Swedish teachers do not encourage their students to expand their ideas when working with literary texts. Rather, students' initial interpretations are immediately accepted.

In comparison to French students, research has indicated that Swedish students are socialized into a tradition that promotes personal readings and individual opinions of literary texts rather than analytic close reading (Johansson, 2015). Although Swedish teachers refer to language development and reading comprehension when talking about teaching objectives in literature studies, they still emphasize the reading experience (including for example aesthetic awareness, identification with fictional characters, and getting to know other people's experiences) as an important approach to literature (Wintersparv, 2021). Swedish students associate their own experiences and sometimes identify themselves with the characters they read about, but seldom pay attention to literary devices (Nissen, 2020). While Kabel (2012) found that Danish students merely engage in fictional characters on a superficial level, her

study also indicates that Danish students can use analytical concepts, and to quote the literary text in order to justify their interpretation. When observing Norwegian literature instruction, Gabrielsen et al. (2019) noticed that teachers and students frequently focused on general genre features and literary devices when talking about literary texts. In conclusion, these findings suggest that across the resembling contexts that the Nordic educational systems represent, there may be some critical differences in how literature is used and taught.

1.3 Choosing literary texts—national characteristics

Previous research has shown that Scandinavian teachers frequently meet students who are not used to reading long advanced texts, and who are not interested in literature (Penne, 2012). Therefore, these teachers often choose literary texts that their students actually like, and that present situations where young people can recognize themselves and their own lives (Penne, 2012). However, there also seems to be various national differences that guide teachers' choices of literature.

In Finland, literature has traditionally played an important part in language arts. In 1998, when the subject changed names from "mother tongue" to "mother tongue and literature", its prominent role was even more emphasized (Höglund, 2019). Many Finnish teachers point out that it is very important for them to make their students interested in reading. Therefore, they try to find books that appeal to their students (Rejman, 2013). Tainio and Grünthal (2016) claim that the intimate interrelation between language and literature studies in Finnish classrooms is an important reason why Finnish students' literacy skills are so well developed. In Finland, language arts teachers often base their instructions on literary texts (Luukka et al., 2008). The cultural heritage and gender issues affect teachers' choices of texts, as well as the supply and stock of books at individual schools (Rejman, 2013). Tainio and Grünthal (2016) note that, when it comes to contemporary prose and poetry, Finnish teachers constantly endeavor to introduce fresh examples. Since they want their students to expand their reading repertoire, they aim to introduce a versatility of genres and titles (Rejman, 2013).

The Icelandic national curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, p. 102) prescribes that students should be able to "read, interpret, evaluate and discuss a variety of Icelandic and foreign literature". Neither titles, nor literary genres, are mentioned in the curriculum. Nevertheless, previous research has shown that the same literary texts recur in many schools (Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2018). Kristjánsdóttir et al. (2018) state that for the main part of the 20th century, tradition dominated the teaching of literature. Today, contemporary literature plays a very important role, but the Icelandic sagas are still popular among the majority of students (Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2018). According to Lea (2015), students in upper secondary school primarily read imaginative literature that mainly consists of poetry and narrative prose. There is an emphasis on Icelandic classics such as the saga literature and the *Edda* poetry; and Icelandic language arts teachers in upper secondary

school attach great importance to the cultural heritage, i.e., the Icelandic language and literature, when they describe their subject (Lea, 2015).

Norwegian language arts teachers in lower secondary school legitimate the position of literature in different ways, but typically share an understanding that literature is important (Kjelen, 2013). When they choose literary texts to use in their instruction, they aim to find texts that will appeal to their students. Factors such as traditions, collegial agreements, and access to books are also important when they decide which texts to work with (Kjelen, 2013). The same texts are often used for a long time, and a relatively small number of well-known titles frequently recur (Kjelen, 2013). Skaug and Blikstad-Balas (2019) found that although many language arts teachers in upper secondary school express a positive attitude towards reading complete works, it is more common for them to use excerpts from textbooks in their instructions. Therefore, although Norwegian teachers are in practice free to choose any texts they want, Skaug and Blikstad-Balas (2019) could nevertheless identify an unofficial canon based on titles published in students' textbooks. Also in lower secondary school, the majority of the literary texts Norwegian students read can be found in their textbooks (Gabrielsen & Blikstad-Balas, 2020). Gabrielsen and Blikstad-Balas (2020) remark that surprisingly few teachers actively choose literary texts to use in their classrooms. Usually, they rely on choices that have been made by publishers, or let their students choose their own books to read.

Furthermore, the Swedish curriculum allows teachers a great deal of freedom when it comes to choosing literary texts (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). Many teachers prefer to describe their instructions as "textbook-free", but textbooks are used also by Swedish language arts teachers (Ullström, 2009). When they copy pages from textbooks, or use class sets of different anthologies, their students meet literary texts and tasks from various instructional materials (Ullström, 2009). It is common that Swedish teachers choose literary texts based on the assumption that it is valuable for students to be able to identify themselves with the characters they read about (Lindhé, 2015). Accordingly, factors such as identification and recognition guide teachers' choices, whereas complicated language, or an unaccustomed context, can deter them from using a certain text (Tengberg, 2011). Recently, there has been an increased focus on literature discussions as a way to enhance students' reading comprehension (Martinsson, 2018). When literature is discussed, a joint reading experience is necessary. As a consequence, Swedish teachers sometimes use literary texts, for example short novels, that students can read, discuss and understand within one single lesson. This might explain why so-called easy readers have become increasingly popular in Sweden (Nordenstam & Olin-Scheller, 2018).

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants and data collection procedures

The study draws on video data collected across 102 classrooms in the Nordic countries (Finland: 8, Iceland: 10, Norway: 46, and Sweden: 38) in the first year of lower secondary school (students are 13–14 years old), which means grades 7 (Finland¹ and Sweden) and 8 (Iceland and Norway). The classrooms were sampled to provide insight into typical and nationally representative teaching practices, and schools varied in size, location, and in composition of socioeconomic background of parents. The teachers who participated in the study varied in age and years of teaching experience. Across all countries, most of the teachers were female, in line with the Nordic gender imbalance among language arts teachers (see Table 1). As can be seen in Table 1, teachers also possessed different qualifications in language arts.

Table 1 Teacher demographic data

Country	Gender		Age*						Qualification in Subject (ECTS)*				
	Female	Male	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	No ed.	0-30	31-60	61-90	90+	
Finland	7	7	0	0	5	1	1	0	0	0	0	7	
Iceland	9	7	2	0	3	3	3	0	0	1	4	3	
Norway	26	22	4	5	10	6	2	1	2	2	17	1	
Sweden	28	22	6	0	5	18	4	1	0	0	5	13	
All Countries	70	58	12	5	23	28	10	2	2	3	26	21	

*Information about two of the Norwegian teachers is missing.

Four consecutive language arts lessons were video recorded in each classroom. Since the intention behind the research project was to examine naturally occurring instruction, teachers were asked to follow their ordinary lesson plans, meaning that many recorded lessons would contain content other than literature, for example writing or formal language training. For the present study, the entire recorded material is initially maintained for overview. However, for subsequent analyses of literature

¹ Because no one in the research group speaks Finnish, all video data from Finland were collected in Swedish-speaking classrooms.

instruction and text use, only those lessons are selected in which a literary text is present and in focus for instructional activities. Lessons would normally last 45 minutes but could be both shorter and longer. When coding data, we systematically divided each lesson into 15-minute segments to be able to distinguish between lessons where texts were used for the entire lesson (for example 45 minutes, equaling three segments), and lessons where literary texts were used only for a smaller portion of the lesson. Thus, the unit of comparison and analysis in this work is at the segment level, but we have seen all the four lessons from each classroom. In total, 1,171 segments (equaling approximately 290 hours) were included in this study (72 from Finland, 100 from Iceland, 535 from Norway, and 464 from Sweden).

Table 2 Numbers of classrooms and segments included in the study

Country	Number of classrooms	Number of 15-minute segments	Number of segments per classroom (Mean)
Finland	8	72	9
Iceland	10	100	10
Norway	46	535	11,6
Sweden	38	464	12,2
All countries	102	1171	11,5

Due to practical circumstances, the datasets enabled from Norway and Sweden were substantially larger than those from Finland and Iceland (see Table 2.) This raises some critical questions about comparability of the data in the study. However, since large-scale video-uptake of naturally occurring instruction is rare in the field of educational research, and since the act of making a representative reduction of the two larger datasets would have entailed several problematic sampling issues, we have chosen to include as much of the collected data as possible, and to remain cautious when drawing conclusions from the comparative analyses. In practice, this means that our study provides a broader picture of Norwegian and Swedish literature instruction than of Finnish and Icelandic literature instruction. However, although the data from Finland and Iceland was comparatively limited, we found it highly valuable since it helped us discern patterns that we otherwise would not have been able to notice. In addition, the data also indicates and suggests what characterizes Finnish and Icelandic literature instruction. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first time that literature instruction from these countries is compared systematically based on authentic classroom observations.

Video recordings have proven valuable in classroom analysis by enabling systematic investigation of complex educational settings and deconstruction of detailed qualities in teaching (Blikstad-Balas, 2017; Heath et al., 2010; Klette, 2009). The same

video design was used across all classrooms and included two fixed cameras simultaneously recording the same lesson: one capturing the students and one focusing on the teacher. The camera setup followed methodological recommendations to use small fixed cameras to minimize interference of the cameras in the classroom setting (vom Lehn & Heath, 2007). One microphone was placed on the teacher and another one was fixed to capture the class, which provides reasonably good audio of both whole-class discourse and of teachers conferencing with individual students. In order to provide a richer representation of the classroom activities, copies of assignments and photos of whiteboard instructions, and student products were collected.

All teachers, parents, and students have consented to participating in the study, following the ethical consent guidelines in their home country.

1.4 Analyses

All the video data from the 102 classrooms were systematically screened to identify lessons containing literary texts, such as poems, novels, short stories, comics, and plays. This is a typical way of “winnowing the data” in a large data corpus (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guest et al., 2012). In this initial analysis, the aim was to exclude all lessons in which students were not reading and/or working with a literary text. The authors systematically viewed each recorded lesson and carefully reviewed the original logs from on-site data collection, where research assistants had written down what kind of activities (including reading literature) was happening in the lesson.

When we analyzed the lessons, we systematically registered titles, authors, and genres of literary texts that were used. Then all texts were categorized into broader genres. We also jot down what kind of instruction took place during a lesson, for instance “the teacher reads aloud from X”, “sustained silent reading”, “instruction about reading comprehension strategies”, “whole class/ group discussions about the text”, “students write book reviews” and so on. These inductive notes helped us investigate for what purposes literature was used in different classrooms. Based on our notes, we discerned a number of relevant “functions”. In this process, it was important to find a limited number of categories that captured important aspects, and that were clearly separated from each other. The identified functions were not mutually exclusive as the same literary text can be used for multiple purposes, and as the results will show, several lessons incorporated more than one way of using literature. The deductive codes (functions) that we developed are:

- *Provide students with positive reading experiences*, used when teachers frame texts as a way to arouse students’ desire to read, and as something that will be a positive reading experience;
- *Help students develop their reading and reading comprehension*, used when teachers emphasize that reading and working with a specific text will foster competent readers;

- *Convey a cultural heritage*, used for instance when literary texts are justified as important to read because they belong to some kind of (national, often implicit) canon;
- *Use literature as a source of knowledge*, applied broadly to instances when teachers indicate that literary texts possess content knowledge, which can be transmitted to readers. Sometimes literary texts are used to teach students about other cultures, other peoples' lives and/or ethical issues. In such cases, they provide knowledge about the external world. When students are expected to focus on literary concepts and genre features, literature is used as a source of knowledge about literature itself. In these cases, the code is also applied; and
- *Provide content and inspiration for students' written and oral production*, used when students are required to present their understanding of a literary text in written text, or in a prepared oral presentation.

2. RESULTS

The aim of this study was to compare the enacted literature instruction in lower secondary language arts classrooms in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and to examine how and to what extent literary texts are used in the instruction. A quantitative analysis of the material revealed that literature played an important part in all four countries. In 69% of all classrooms in all four countries, students read and/or worked with literary texts at least once during the video-recorded lessons. However, as can be seen in Table 3, the prevalence of literature instruction varied between countries, from 57% (in Norway) to 90% (in Iceland). There was also a difference in how much lesson time was actually spent on literature instruction. In Finland, Norway and Sweden students read and/or worked with literary texts during approximately one third of the lesson time, while in Iceland, 53% of the lesson time was used for literature instruction.

Table 3 Classrooms with literature instruction and lesson time spent on literature instruction

	Total number of classrooms	Classrooms with Literature Instruction	Lesson time spent on literature instruction*	
		Number	%	%
Finland	8	7	88	36
Iceland	10	9	90	54
Norway	46	26	57	31
Sweden	38	28	74	36
All Countries	102	70	69	35

* Based on the number of segments where literary texts were read and/or discussed.

One of the aspects that we wanted to investigate was how lessons where literature instruction took place were organized. We found that in Iceland and Sweden, whole lessons were normally used for literature instruction. This pattern was present in Finland and Norway as well, but more commonly, teachers in these countries would use at least part of a lesson to teach something else. Norwegian teachers sometimes gave lectures (15 minutes or more) about themes related to the literary text at hand (e.g., genre features, literary devices, or the author) before it was presented to the students. In Finland, students normally worked with varied subject matter within the same lesson. A teacher would, for example, give her students instructions about how to prepare an oral presentation before reading aloud from a teenage novel during the last ten minutes of the lesson. Students in another classroom would practice writing for 15 minutes before turning their attention to a novel excerpt, which was then read and discussed during the remainder of the lesson.

Comments from teachers and students indicate that reading and/or working with literature was a recurring element (normally every week) in some of the observed classrooms. The four national samples all include classrooms where sustained silent reading was a regular activity. In Sweden, teachers would also sometimes organize discussions about chapters from a novel that the students had read at home, thereby facilitating their reading process and providing opportunities for expressing their ideas about the literary text. Moreover, we observed Swedish classrooms in which working with literature constituted a theme for a series of lessons, often focusing on a single text (a novel or a short story), as well as classrooms in which the reading of many short stories or excerpts from novels were used for the purpose of teaching and practicing reading comprehension strategies.

We also investigated to what extent different literary genres were read and worked upon in the daily instruction. When doing so, we discovered that when working with literature, these Nordic students solely met traditional genres. For the most part, they read and worked with narrative texts, such as novels for teenagers, short stories, and fairy tales (see Table 4). This was true for 91% of all observed classrooms that worked with literature, whereas only 22% of them worked with lyric poetry in one way or another. Although students in one of the Finnish classrooms were asked to write their own poems based on a short story that they had listened to, none of the Finnish classrooms ($N = 7$) actually read texts from this genre. Approximately one-fourth of teachers (18 out of 70) in the four countries used short stories or excerpts from novels in their instruction. Sometimes, especially in Iceland and Norway, teachers used texts that were published in students' textbooks.

It was rather common that teachers let their students read novels of their own free choice (See table 4). In all four countries, there were also examples of classrooms (a least one) where all students read, or listened to, the same novel. However, this praxis was much more common in Sweden than in the other three countries. In 13 of the Swedish classrooms ($N=28$), all students worked with the same novel, generally a contemporary novel written for teenagers. We found a noteworthy variation

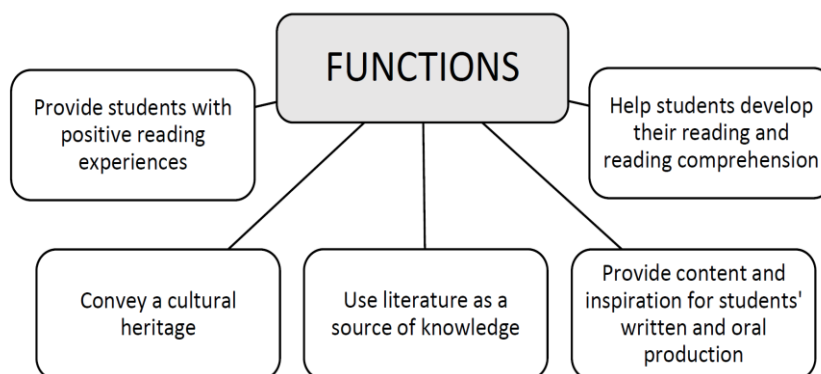
when it comes to titles, and there were only two examples (in four of the Swedish classrooms) where the same two novels were used.

Table 4 Numbers (and percentages) of classrooms where different literary genres were used

Country and total number of classrooms	Novels for teenagers (the same book for everyone)	Novels Free choice of reading	Short stories/excerpts from novels	Fairy tales, myths and fables	Lyrics	Poetry	Comics
Finland 7 classrooms	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	3 (43%)	3 (43%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Iceland 9 classrooms	1 (11%)	2 (22%)	3 (33%)	3 (33%)	0 (0%)	3 (33%)	0 (0%)
Norway 26 classrooms	1 (4%)	10 (38%)	13 (50%)	1 (4%)	4 (15%)	6 (23%)	1 (4%)
Sweden 28 classrooms	13 (46%)	4 (14%)	5 (18%)	6 (21%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Finally, we examined for what subject-specific functions or purposes literary texts were read and worked upon in the observed classrooms. The analysis was based on five different categories described in the methods section above (see Figure 1). The analysis showed that some functions were more prevalent than others. “Help students develop their reading and reading comprehension” (observed in 45 out of 70 classrooms) and “Provide students with positive reading experiences” (observed in 36 out of 70 classrooms) were much more common than the other three functions. In Icelandic classrooms, there was a comparatively strong focus on “Convey a cultural heritage”. “Use literature as a source of knowledge” and “Provide content and inspiration for students’ written or oral production” were more frequent in Norway than in the other three countries. How the different functions were implemented in the instruction will be described below.

Figure 1 Functions of literary texts



“Help students develop their reading and reading comprehension” was the most common function. In 64 % (N=45) of the classrooms with literature instruction, students were presented with different kinds of tasks that presumably support such a development. Typically, students took part in discussions about the text, or answered questions about it. There were also many classrooms where the students briefly summarized what they had read, orally, in writing or in picture. Reading comprehension strategies were taught and/or actively used in some of the Norwegian and Swedish classrooms, but neither in Finland nor in Iceland.

It was also very common that literature was used to provide students with positive reading experiences. In all four countries, there were classrooms where students read silently in books of their own choice. We also observed that when teachers chose novels that they wanted their students to read, they very often made student-oriented choices. For example, they frequently introduced literary texts where students could identify themselves with the main characters. This was especially common in Sweden.

Literary texts are sometimes used as a source of knowledge (for instance about the external world or about literature itself). For instance, it can be used in cross-disciplinary instruction in connection to social subjects (Ingemansson, 2007). We saw surprisingly few examples of this in the classrooms we observed, but in one of the Norwegian classrooms where the students worked with the same theme in language arts and history, the teacher used a poem by Henrik Ibsen (*Terje Vigen*) to illustrate what life in Norway could be like during the Napoleon wars. Eight of the Norwegian teachers in our sample used literary texts to teach their students genre characteristics and/or literary devices. This praxis was less common in the other three countries, but we saw a few examples in Iceland and Sweden as well. In Finland and Iceland, there were a few teachers who used literary texts in their grammar instruction, and

in Norway, literature was used when students practiced reading Norwegian Nynorsk (i.e., one of the two official Norwegian written languages).

“Convey a cultural heritage” was another function that could be observed in several Nordic classrooms. When analyzing our samples, we found that Icelandic teachers frequently gave emphasis to the national cultural heritage. Four of the Icelandic classrooms read and worked with texts related to the Icelandic saga tradition (*Laxdæla* and *Hrafnkellssaga Freysgoði*), or with fairy tales taking place in an Icelandic setting. Fairy tales from a broader Western tradition were presented by Finnish and Swedish teachers. There were also four Swedish classrooms working with myths and stories from ancient Greece. In some classrooms, texts written by famous national authors were used (for example, Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, and Alf Prøysen in Norway; and Astrid Lindgren in Sweden).

When students have processed their understanding of a literary text, on their own or in dialogue with others, they are sometimes asked to represent their understanding of the text in a new format. In such cases, the literary text provides content and inspiration for students’ written and oral production. This was rather common in Norway, where literature had this function in ten of the classrooms where literature instruction took place. In the other three countries, we could see relatively few examples of this praxis, but in some classrooms students presented literary texts that they had read in book reviews, or in oral presentations. There were also examples where students transformed a literary text into another genre.

3. DISCUSSION

This study sets out to compare the enacted literature instruction in lower secondary language arts classrooms in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and to examine how and to what extent literary texts were used in the instruction. We were interested in finding out what position literary texts have in Nordic lower secondary language arts education, and to investigate the characteristics of Nordic literature instruction. While the sample collected for the study is quite large compared to samples used in previous research of cross-country comparative design (cf. Elf & Kasperen, 2012; van der Ven & Doecke, 2011), it should be underscored that it still captures only a glimpse of what goes on in Nordic language arts classrooms. A total amount of 290 hours of language arts instruction in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden have been recorded and analyzed. However, the study provides only a mere indication of the potentials, limits, prospects, and challenges that the prevalent instruction contains. Minding those limitations in terms of representativity, it is still feasible to obtain from the analysis an array of reasonable and relevant hypotheses about patterns, trajectories, differences and, similarities in Nordic lower secondary literature instruction.

To sum up the results, the study showed that a considerable amount of lesson time (35%) was spent on literature instruction, but the way in which it was organized varied between the four countries included in the study. Spending the entire lesson

working on a literary text was common in Iceland and Sweden, while in Finland and Norway, literary reading often constituted a part of the lesson, which would also contain other subject content. The use of literary genres proved to be similar between countries, favoring the narrative text (novels or short stories) above poetry, comics, and drama. Finally, the data displayed a range of various functions and purposes of using literature that cut across countries. In all Nordic countries, literary texts were frequently used to foster students into competent and interested readers, but there were also some country-specific patterns (e.g., that to convey a cultural heritage was more prevalent in Iceland, that joint novel reading and focus on students' development of comprehension was a trait more typical for Sweden, and that using literary reading as a way to teach students genre features was more common in Norwegian language arts classrooms).

By reference to these results, literature seems to maintain a central position in Nordic lower secondary language arts instruction, thus reflecting the intentions expressed in the current syllabi (Gourvenec et al., 2020; Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2014), where, for example, aspects such as positive reading experiences and personal growth are referred to (Gourvenec et al., 2020; Höglund, 2019). As previously mentioned, our data indicates that Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish teachers habitually attempt to find literary texts that appeal to their students. As the frequency of teenagers' leisure time reading decreases, and teachers' planning of instruction is only to a limited degree guided by textbooks, it may be natural that contemporary narrative literature written for teenagers is favored in order to engage students in reading by avoiding the aesthetic and emotional friction often afforded by using for instance poetry or drama in the classroom (Peskin, 2010; Weaven & Clark, 2013). Thus, the openness of the syllabi in terms of text selection (where different literary genres are mentioned but not prescribed as assigned reading) may contribute to a narrowed scope of variation in the literature chosen.

However, when textbooks do guide teachers' choices of literature, as we found to be more prevalent in Iceland and Norway than in Finland and Sweden, unofficial canons are formed (Aamotsbakken, 2011; Skaug & Blikstad-Balas, 2019; Vinje, 2005) that may undermine intentions of the syllabus (see Fougt et al., 2020). On average, teachers in the latter two countries had earned higher subject-specific qualifications, which is likely to support confidence in their own professional judgment and autonomy, and thus equips teachers to make their own selections without the influence of textbook canons. At the same time, text selection practices are known to be part of local school-based traditions, economic limitations as well as of national traditions and trajectories of the ongoing dialogue between language arts teachers online (Applebee, 1992; van Bommel et al., 2020). The country-specific tendencies observed in the present study may thus be governed by both individual and social factors of text selection. Although the present dataset, as noted above, cannot be thought of as representative for the national contexts, a reasonable pursuit of future research should certainly be to gauge more thoroughly the motives behind, and the trajectories of, literary selection in various countries.

Since the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity, but rather a dynamic experience (Iser, 1978), readers preferably make use of their own disposition and personal experiences when literary texts are interpreted. This can facilitate and develop their understanding of the text (Iser, 1978; Langer, 2011). Previous research has shown that Nordic teachers choose literature that appeals to their students (Kjelen, 2013; Rejman, 2013) and where these young readers can recognize themselves and aspects from their own lives (Lindhé, 2015, Tengberg, 2011). This is in line with our findings, which suggests that Nordic teachers often make student-oriented choices when they decide which literary texts should be part of a joint reading experience. However, the idea that teachers' instruction ought to draw on students' experiences and preferences can be questioned (Ziehe, 2004). According to Ziehe (2004), it can be important for teachers to orchestrate situations where conceptions that seem self-evident, or even plain, are challenged. Sønneland (2019) found that literary texts that offer resistance attract lower-secondary students. When encouraged to talk about literary texts in which the narrative form was complicated, students paid attention to what disturbed them, and got involved in literary discussions about topics and ideas that they found relevant and important. As Sønneland (2019) points out, this indicates that difficulty does not stand in opposition to attraction. Her findings, as well as Ziehe's (2004) ideas, raise questions about what kinds of texts are suitable to use in literature instruction.

In Norway, but also in Iceland, literary texts were used in situations where genre features and literary devices were taught. This can certainly be a way for students to develop their metalanguage, and to gain a vocabulary that potentially makes it possible for them to discuss literature at a deeper level. However, what we observed in these classrooms were merely situations where literature was used to exemplify genre features and literary devices. Students were not encouraged to use their knowledge about these issues when discussing and interpreting literary texts. In the Swedish and Finnish classrooms, teachers paid little, if any, attention to issues related to genre features. This is in line with what previous research has shown. Torell (2002) found that Finnish and Swedish teacher candidates were fostered in a school system where there was a lack of training when it comes to understanding and analyzing literary texts as aesthetic works of art. More recent studies (Johansson, 2015; Nissen, 2020) have shown that Swedish students seldom include analytical aspects such as narrative perspective, narrative structure, or figures of speech when they share their thoughts about literary texts. Training students to employ that sort of perspectives might be a way of promoting readings more conscious of the work as composition, and thus a more analytic look on the work as an aesthetic object.

In conclusion, the present study represents a preliminary bird's-eye view of naturally occurring literature instruction across four of the Nordic countries. Although it contributes with valuable information about lesson organization, text selection, and functions and purposes of literary reading, there is a range of aspects that need to be further investigated. For instance, the study suggests that using literature to foster competent readers and develop comprehension is a prevalent function of

literature instruction in Nordic classrooms, but the study does not allow for any conclusions about the way in which teachers' planning relate the literary aspects of literature reading to the more general goal of reading comprehension. In the same way, we do observe many differences and similarities between instruction in the different countries, but it is not in the scope of the present study to establish the extent to which such differences (or similarities) relate to educational cultures and curricula, or if individual differences between teachers and classrooms also play a significant role in the patterns we observed. For these purposes, subsequent studies are necessary. Therefore, we hope that comparative designs of research into literature instruction are at a beginning, for there is much to learn, and new patterns to be detected, by contrasting instructional traditions across cultural borders.

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