

TEACHING FICTION IN THE AGE OF MEASURABILITY

Teachers' perspectives on the hows and whats in Swedish L1 classrooms

SPOKE WINTERSPARV, KIRK P. H. SULLIVAN, & MARIA LINDGREN
LEAVENWORTH

Umeå University

Abstract

Studies have shown a slow but steady change in reading habits among students in Swedish upper secondary schools. The frequency with which they read fiction on a daily basis has decreased and reading comprehension has declined. Consequently, Swedish politicians and school authorities have taken measures to reverse these trends. Fiction reading has traditionally been a part of the Swedish subject, but whereas the course syllabi in the upper secondary school stipulate that fiction be taught, they pay little attention to how. This study examines how teachers describe the process of literary education. In doing so, it suggests that monitoring students is central to teachers' didactic decisions, and that both teachers and students regard printed books more highly than both audiobooks and e-books. The data was collected using two focus groups interviews with upper secondary school teachers of Swedish, seven female and five male, age 28 to 61. The analysis was grounded in a phenomenographic examination of experience, allowing themes to emerge through iterative coding. The findings show that the teachers' view on literary education is associated with instrumentality and teacher-centered activities—the discussions circled around practical aspects, with no mention of teaching objectives, approaches, or literary experience.

Keywords: literary education, reading habits, the Reading Experience, measurability

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary education plays a central role in first language studies in Sweden. Integrated with the study of language, it is a part of the core content in all three Swedish courses in upper secondary education (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012), with gradually expanding depth and perspectives. In the overall aim of the subject, The Swedish National Agency for Education (2012) declares that students, through fiction, should be offered the opportunity to understand both what is distinctive and what is universal in space and time. Furthermore, literary education should result in students' ability to use fiction as a source of self-awareness and understanding, challenging them to new ways of thinking and new perspectives. Closely knit with this is the aim to develop the students' knowledge of the Swedish language—its structure and origin as well as different language variations (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012).

While the requirement for the literary part in the course for first year students is to read fiction, written by men and women and reflecting different periods and cultures, with focus on key themes, narrative techniques, and stylistic features, the syllabus for the second-year course includes multimodality and relating the fictional work to societal developments. Literary devices and key literary concepts are also included. This is further extended to include literary analysis and literary history in the third year course (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012). But whereas the course syllabi clearly stipulate that fiction be taught, they do not specify how this should be conducted.

Thus, the objective of the current study is to examine the perspectives of first language teachers in Swedish upper secondary education on their own teaching of literature, with attention paid to the Reading Experience. Here, we would like to make a distinction between reading experience in terms of being an experienced reader, and the Reading Experience, which conceptualizes thoughts, feelings, and reactions the reader experiences during reading. What aspects do teachers find important? What approaches are used in Swedish classrooms when it comes to teaching fiction? In short, what do teachers do in literature classes? The need to examine these aspects was voiced by Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho, and Rijlaarsdam (2016) in their study on the impact of literature education on students' self- and social perceptions, and the relationships between students' learning experiences and their teachers' classroom practices.

1.1 Changing reading habits

One aspect of teaching fiction in school is students' reading habits, the development of which is often discussed in relation to academic achievement and reading comprehension (OECD, 2010b). Adolescents and young adults turn to fiction less frequently, when they do read, they spend less time doing so, and modern technology plays an important role in this development. Those are—roughly summarized—the

main findings in international studies on reading habits within the age group 12–24 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Walia & Sinha, 2014; Wilson & Casey, 2007). Numerous studies (e.g. Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson, 2006; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Tveit, 2012) suggest a distinct and consistent decline over time, and the trend appears to be global. By examining teachers' intentions and approaches in literary education, we want to better understand the relation between classroom practice and the negative development of reading habits, also illustrated by Bradshaw, Nichols, and National Endowment for the Arts' (2004) survey of literary reading in America.

The study showed that, in 2002, 43% of 18–24-year-olds in the United States had read some work of poetry, fiction, or drama in the preceding year (Bradshaw et al., 2004). This is notably lower than reported by Hughes-Hassel and Rodge (2007), whose study was considerably smaller than the one by Bradshaw et al. (2004), and indicated that 72% of the students engage in reading as a leisure activity. However, only 36% responded “yes” to whether they enjoyed reading, and thus moved the population of the study closer to similar studies.

This decline is supported by a study based on data from National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which reports a 10-point increase of 17-year-olds who rarely or never engaged in leisure reading from 1984 (9%) to 2004 (19%) (Perie, Moran, Lutkus, & National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). The drop in percentage of 17-year-olds who engaged in leisure reading—that is, any kind of reading that is voluntary outside the school context—was nine points over the same 20-year period. Bauerlein (2010) explains this decline with the advent of the Digital Age; the time once potentially allotted to reading is now shared with narratives in other media and new habits that come with that. Although this is part of the reason, voices have been raised to further problematize a simplistic explanation. Among suggested contributory causes are the lack of interest and desire, and a growing sense of difficulty to engage in books (Birkerts, 2004), which we address by paying attention to the aesthetic aspects of reading via the Reading Experience.

In their analysis based on quantitative data from the Swedish longitudinal research program “The Media Panel”, Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson (2006) find that the amount of time for reading literary fiction has not decreased due to new types of media, but on the contrary, reading time has increased despite more time spent with new technology. Overall, the authors find little support for the displacement hypothesis, that is, the idea that old media are replaced by new ones as people begin to adopt the latter and change their media consumption habits. Support for similar tendencies in a classroom-specific context can be found in more recent studies. For instance, Grant et al. (2015), Thomas and Munoz (2016), and (Walker, 2013) all show that mobile units such as cell phones and tablets have not replaced traditional classroom instruction, but are rather used to reinforce and supplement lessons.

Instead, Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson (2006) seek the reasons to why some adolescents never read fiction in attitudes towards and conceptions of reading fictive works in the home environment and the surrounding society. This is aligned with

Wells's (1985) findings, which show that children who are read to by their parents during the pre-school years have an increased interest in the written language, as well as with Bourdieu's theory about the forming of the individual habitus (1996). This means that a shift in reading habits is not something that can be explained with short-term changes in media availability only but must be examined through long-term habits.

1.2 The Swedish context

Lidman et al. (2012a) maintain that general reading habits in Sweden have been mainly stable since the 1970s, with overall slow changes (Lidman et al., 2012a). However, there is one age group that appears to deviate from this; statistics from 2000 to 2010 show a decline in the percentage of 9–17-year-olds who engage in reading fiction on a daily basis (Lidman et al., 2012b). The change is fairly small—6 and 7 percentage points among girls and boys respectively—but steady.

The use of fiction, viewed in a broader perspective than in the current study, among Swedish teenagers, ages 17 to 18, was examined by Lundström and Svensson (2017).

Their results showed that among all fictional texts consumed by the participants during an average week, literary fiction received the least amount of time. The participants read fiction approximately 51 minutes per week, whereas they spent 373 minutes watching films, 362 minutes watching TV series and 291 minutes playing computer games.

In the Swedish context, the research field of literature didactics, is relatively new (Bommarco, 2006). A brief overview, covering merely the past 35 years, offers an insight into the variety of the field's foci—from how organizational frameworks dictate literary education, hindering teachers and learners to read beyond instrumentality (Linnér, 1984), different modes of reading and analyzing fiction in literary education (Malmgren, 1986), and how the view on fiction is expressed in textbooks (Brink, 1992; Danielsson, 1988), to experiential learning in the Swedish subject allowing an exchange of personal experiences and conceptions (Elmfeldt, 1997) and the need for an altered teacher role in the Swedish literary classroom (Molloy, 2002).

Since the mid-1900s, there has been a shift in the Swedish literary classroom from New Criticism to reader-response theory (Bommarco, 2006). The shift had its origin in a view on learning which considers how the students construct their understanding of the fictional world (Sørensen, 2001). The notion that students should be able to express their thoughts and feelings freely in their encounter with fiction, is in line with Louise Rosenblatt's vision of a purposeful literary education (Bommarco, 2006), and has today evolved into a view on fiction in the school context as a source of enjoyment for the students—far from the 1850s' knowledge-driven purpose of reading fiction (Molloy, 2002). This resonates with Probst's (1988) idea that students will have a reason to read if reading is enjoyable. Other reasons for introducing fiction in the Swedish classroom have traditionally been ethical, nationalistic, idealistic,

developmental, and focused on the processing of existential and social experiences (Thavenius, 1991).

Research shows that teachers' strategies and teaching approaches play a crucial role for learning outcomes (Yimwilai, 2015), and by constructing and focusing questions in a certain manner, teachers signpost the central aspects of a text to the students, and thus how a certain piece of work is expected to be approached (McCormick, 1994). Another factor that impacts on learning outcomes is the level of student-centeredness in the classroom (Mukhametshina & Akhmatova, 2015; Schrijvers et al., 2016). The new teacher role that Molloy (2002) speaks of springs from this anti-authoritative notion, and is one in which the teacher reads and discusses with the students to promote learning through social and intellectual encounters. According to this approach, the students are co-creators with agency through their reading and writing.

Tengberg (2009) refers to Säljö (2000) when he considers the reflective aspect in the discussion about fiction from a sociocultural perspective, and treats it in terms of a collective learning action. It is this discussion that carries a potential to develop students' attitude towards reading in general and the text in particular. However, Tengberg (2009) maintains, there is a discrepancy between how fiction reading in school is operationalized by teachers and how it is viewed within the research field of literature didactics. While the former considers fiction as a means to acquire language and literary taste, the latter applies a less tangible approach.

In her doctoral thesis, Fatheddine (2019) examines corporal dimensions of fiction reading as a part of students' Reading Experience, whose essence, she argues, and ways of being understood are missing when being discussed in research. She focuses on how students' encounters with fiction may be related to corporality and, in addition, studies the curricular view on fiction reading and how it is applied by teachers. Like Tengberg (2009), Fatheddine (2019) points to the discrepancy between curricular intentions and teaching practices in the literary classroom. Another conclusion she draws is that the Reading Experience has a corporal dimension and is a possible way to *bildung*.

The shift during the mid-20th century to a sociocultural perspective on literary education along with the increasing attention to student-centered instruction and to the Reading Experience have implications for the focus of the current study. If the discrepancy documented by Tengberg and Fatheddine means that teachers' didactic decisions in literary education deviate from curricular intentions, then how is classroom practice described by teachers? And how is this manifested in teaching activities?

1.3 Leisure reading and the focus on measurability

The amount of leisure reading has been related to academic achievement concerning vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension (Krashen, 2004). Students who engage in reading fiction outside of the school context not only become more

proficient readers, but in addition score higher on achievement tests in all subject areas (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991). This connection is strengthened by the 2009 results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) PISA, where the proficient readers were students who read for enjoyment on a regular basis, and whose reading material was diverse (OECD, 2010b). Even though the students of the participating teachers of the current study are older than the ones tested by PISA, and therefore not directly related to the assessment results and their entailment, the general focus on measurability may be anticipated to be correspondingly present in upper secondary classrooms. Thus, the inclusion of PISA in the current study is not to demonstrate the relation between the participants and the Swedish results, but rather to illustrate the aspect of measurability in education.

Corresponding to the 2009 PISA results, independent leisure reading and reading comprehension generate a positive spiral (Mol & Bus, 2011). Although the direction of causality is difficult to determine, the connection, nevertheless, seems apparent and may be explained with the Matthew effect which, simply put, has a catalytic effect on positive and negative trends, causing a widening gap between the different subgroups (Hoflin et al., 2018). In other words, well-developed literacy skills increase motivation to read, which results in more reading, which in turn results in further improved literacy. Thus, the negative development in Swedish reading habits is possible to examine in relation to the declining results among Swedish students in reading comprehension in PISA (OECD, 2016a).

1.4 Measures in the Swedish context

Swedish PISA results have consistently declined since the first cycle of the assessment in 2000 (Ekholm & Wester, 2001; OECD, 2004, 2007, 2010a, 2014, 2016b). To discontinue this downward spiraling trend among Swedish students, the Swedish National Agency of Education launched a program, *Läslyftet* [The Reading Boost], in 2012 to improve the national reading proficiency for the age group. The program was a result of the Swedish Government Official Report *Läsandets kultur* [The Culture of Reading] (Lidman et al., 2012a). The following three goals were set up to be reached by 2018.

- Reading proficiency needs to improve considerably, and the motivation to read needs to increase measurably compared to today, among children and adolescents.
- More children and adolescents, compared to today, need to take part of both non-fiction and fiction.
- Knowledge about the significance of reading needs, for the purpose of education and participation in society, needs to be increased in the demographic groups which, today, read to a limited extent. (Our translation.)

In 2013, the Swedish Arts Council was commissioned by the government to initiate, coordinate, and follow up nationally strategic measures promoting reading. Three years later, the Swedish government appointed a committee to assemble various

actors around reading within and outside of the school context. The main objective was to promote equal opportunities for children and adolescents to adequate literacy and enjoyable reading experiences (Hoflin et al., 2018). Some of the suggestions presented by the committee were early mapping of students' reading and writing difficulties and to work with language development across all school subjects. Furthermore, the committee stressed the importance of teachers initiating discussions with students about the literary works that they have read, and that teachers serve as role models through their own reading of fiction and talking about it.

To reach the goals set up by the Swedish National Agency of Education, measures were taken both outside of and within the educational context. For the latter, literary ambassadors were introduced, along with in-service programs for teachers, and improvements concerning school libraries. But while it is easy to acknowledge the importance of highlighting fiction in the classroom to turn the negative trend in reading habits and reading proficiency, the objective should reach beyond the mere fact that literary fiction is being taught, and further extend to the manners in which it is being taught.

The significance of the current study is its identification of essential features of the teaching of literature, both as established in previous research and as reported by the participants in the focus group interviews that constitute the source of data. Specifically, it relates current classroom practice to previous research, and in doing so, increases the understanding of the conditions in which fiction is taught in the specific context represented by the focus groups. This, in turn, facilitates the detection of factors that may play a central role to learning outcomes.

2. THE STATE OF FICTION IN CLASSROOMS

In an overview of previous research on literary education, we found three major reasons to teaching fiction in school, discussed in the literature: language development, learning moral and ethics, and improving critical thinking skills. Furthermore, a number of teaching models and approaches emerged during our overview.

2.1 *Language development*

Fiction and language studies have traditionally been linked together in Sweden—the studying of fiction is stipulated in the course syllabus for the Swedish subject. The same applies to foreign language studies. The close association between fiction and language studies becomes especially evident when compared with how seldom fiction is combined with other school subjects, such as mathematics (Padula, 2004), chemistry (Sima, 1998), or history (Lawson & Barnes, 1991). Therefore, in examining previous research on literary education, it is not surprising that language learning was one of the recurring objectives noted. For instance, in a recent study by Mart (2018) with participants from an English language teaching setting at an Iraqi university, fiction is presented as an input-rich source, conducive to language learning. A

majority of the participating university students also indicated that fiction is included in language education due to its support to language learning.

2.2 Moral and ethics

Results from the overview showed that moral and ethical development is an essential aim for introducing literary works in the classroom. In Alsup's (2013) paper on teaching fiction in an age of text complexity, one teacher speaks of a certain novel as a tool for understanding someone else's perspective, and thus enabling or facilitating the development of empathy. In the same paper, an example is presented in which children who read stories with characters of different ethnicity "had markedly improved attitudes toward African Americans" (p. 183). It was shown that the stories substantially improved attitudes toward African Americans.

In their study on the teaching of literature in a multiethnic environment, Golikova, Zamaletdinov, Vafina, and Mukhametshina (2016) draw the conclusion that the interpretation of a literary work contributes to, among other things, the reflection over values, as well as over moral ethical and cultural spheres. One of the main objectives in a Spanish study on children's fiction in the Digital Age classroom, was students' positive behavior patterns (Gilete, 2011). Similarly, Smagorinsky (2000) in his examination of the thematic approach to teaching fiction, talks explicitly about character education, instilling values, and moral codes. The common denominator in the mentioned studies, no matter if the focus is values, ethics, or empathy, is personal development.

2.3 Critical thinking skills

A third recurring reason given for teaching fiction is to let students practice and refine their critical thinking skills. Alsup (2013) argues that reading literary fiction results in, among a number of things, critical thinking, close reading, and analytical writing. In accordance with this, a considerable improvement in critical thinking skills was an outcome of an experiment performed in a study by Yimwilai (2015), in which the efficacy of the integrated approach—that is, the teaching of concepts across more than one subject area, or combining a variety of methods, techniques, and technical devices—was examined. Based on the results from this study, the author suggests the integrated approach be applied when teaching fiction, that is teaching concepts across more than one participant area, or combining a variety of methods, techniques, and technical devices.

2.4 Other reasons to teach fiction

In her paper, Alsup (2013) further lists personal enjoyment and cognitive engagement as gains from teaching fiction, mentioned by teachers. Other researchers, for instance Golikova et al. (2016), highlights creative thinking, imagination, and

communicative competence. In one instance, the gain is discussed in broader terms than individual aspects; rather literary education is assigned a role in how an entire nation views its place in the global society. (Poon, 2010).

2.5 Teaching models and approaches

With the account of aims and reasons, it is—in accordance with Fialho's (2012) findings—clear that there is no consensus among teachers for why fiction is taught, but teachers use different objectives as their point of departure for literary education. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that strategies and teaching approaches, which play an important role to the learning outcomes (Yimwilai, 2015), differ accordingly. Similar conclusions are drawn by Liang (2011) in her comparison of the effects of the cognitive-oriented approach and the reader-response approach. These are two of the most common approaches in teaching fiction. The cognitive-oriented approach is based on a broad set of theories. Diverse influences from cognitive psychology (Anderson, Spiro, & Montegue, 1977; Bruner, 1986), schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980), the interactive model of reading (Rumelhart, 1977), and reading comprehension have led to a cognitive-oriented view of reading (Liang, 2011). Focus is on the construction of knowledge, and in regard to reading, it is recognized as a constructive process in which the reader actively participates and interprets (Liang, 2011). The reader-response approach is based on Louise Rosenblatt's (1938) transactional theories, which suggest that meaning is created in the transaction between a text and its reader. Thus, it encourages students to draw on personal experiences, opinions, and feelings when interpreting the literary text (Van, 2009).

Relating the mentioned approaches and underlying objectives for teaching fiction, to the research questions for this study, attention should be turned to causative elements within the process described by the participants. What objectives to teaching fiction can be found in a Swedish context? How are these objectives targeted with the means of different approaches? The questions what, where and when should correlate to the question how, which in turn should have bearing both on how the reading is followed up and on other activities in connection with the reading.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines literary education as a part of L1 studies in Swedish upper secondary education. The aim is to better understand teachers' perspectives on their process of teaching fiction. The two main inquiries are:

- 1) How do teachers describe the process of their teaching and students reading fiction?

- 2) What activities do teachers employ in teaching fiction—before, during, and after reading?
- 3) How do teachers relate to the Reading Experience in literary education?

How teachers describe the process of students reading fiction is not limited by the methods they choose, but further includes the choice of texts, for when the reading is planned in relation to other curricular content, and where the students read. In short, how do teachers define their strategies for teaching fiction? Furthermore, to broaden the understanding of these strategies, it is necessary to examine them in the context of how reading is followed up and the learning activities that teachers connect with fiction.

4. METHOD

4.1 *Design*

We designed a qualitative study and using the above two research questions, we examined the participants' own practice in and experience of teaching fiction in L1 classrooms. The study was based on the semi-structured interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), although in the current study, applied to focus group discussions. The nature of the semi-structured interview allows the participants to respond freely. Yet, it offers the opportunity for the researcher to insert additional questions, both planned ones and those arising from the participants' answers (Morse, 2012).

4.2 *Discussion protocol*

To determine the general direction of the focus group discussions, we produced a semi-structured discussion protocol. Instead of an opening question, as suggested by Krueger (1994), the first five minutes of the focus group discussion were designated to informal conversation, during which the participants talked freely within the group, to familiarize themselves with the situation and each other. This was followed by three prompts stemming from the research questions:

- 1) When, where, and how do students read fiction?
- 2) How is the reading followed up?
- 3) How would you describe students' reading activities?

The purpose of these questions was to introduce, to the participants, the general topic, according to the protocol construction presented by Krueger (1994).

4.3 *Procedure*

Each focus group met once. While we attended the interview with the first group, Group A, in person, the second interview, with Group B, was conducted using Computer Mediated Communication tools. Due to positive previous experience from

online audiovisual meetings, we were not concerned about the quality of the outcome when the option of an online meeting was presented to us by Group B. The drawbacks that have been raised regarding online meetings, for instance loss of additional layers of meaning through tone, body language, gestures, and facial expressions (Sade-Beck, 2004) were, in the current study, overcome by the use of cameras. Thus, the advantage in face-to-face discussions of the possibility to create a good atmosphere was combined with the accessibility of the telephone interview (Opdenaker, 2006).

Each session lasted around one hour. To avoid participants overly influencing each other's replies and/or having one or a few of them dominating the conversation, the below semi-structured discussion protocol was emailed to the participants prior to the discussions. That way, each teacher had plenty of time to prepare and reflect on the issues that were to be discussed.

During the discussions, the protocol did not restrict the discussions from moving in the directions prompted by the participants, and discussions developed without our influence as an observer. To further minimize our influence on the discussions, and thus avoid affecting the data by inhibiting the participants from saying things they might have revealed under different circumstances (Given, 2008), we refrained from audio recording. Instead, we took down general notes for the overall discussion, and verbatim ones for utterances that were close to the core topics.

4.4 Analysis

At an initial stage, the notes were transferred to a Word document, during which keywords and fragments of sentences were completed to make the language more coherent for further analysis. In analyzing the data, we took an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge during a qualitative, Eclectic Coding process, an open-ended procedure through which codes in the form of first-impression words and phrases are developed (Saldaña, 2013). The codes generated in the analysis and the themes that emerged from them, accompanied by sample quotes connecting to respective theme are presented in Table 1. At a final stage, quotations were selected to represent the themes, translated, and analyzed.

Table 1. Codes and emerging themes with sample quotes

Themes	Codes	Sample Quote
Monitoring	Where	<p>"They only read in the classroom these days. It is the only way to ensure that they are reading at all" Teacher 5, Group A</p> <p>"If they read at home, I would not know if they cheated". Teacher 5, Group A</p>
	When	"I prefer the students to read during class time. I want to be able to control their reading. You have to be the police to make it work." Teacher 7, Group A
	What	"I only work with excerpts and short stories; entire novels take too long to get through" Teacher 1, Group A
Print Material	Print	<p>"I think the Reading Experience is more profound when you read a novel in print." Teacher 1, Group B</p> <p>"I prefer physical books. Things feel less fragmented." Teacher 7, Group A</p>
	E-books	<p>"The Reading Experience that you get from an e-book does not seem as genuine compared to a real book." Teacher 5, Group A</p> <p>"Unlike with a real book, you do not know where you are. How much have you read? Is the book soon finished?" Teacher 2, Group B</p>
	Audiobooks	"The students who need the support of an audiobook are usually the ones who choose not to use it." Teacher 2, Group B

Instrumentality	Presentations	“Sometimes, I try to examine the novel using the form of an oral presentation. That way, I can kill two birds with one stone and teach the Canons of Rhetoric as well” Teacher 6, Group A
	Language Development	“I prefer real books rather than audio books. It is better for the language learning” Teacher 3, Group A
		“I try to choose novels that contain language that challenges my students’ vocabulary” Teacher 1, Group A
		“If I let them read the same things they would at home, then what would be the point of school? I want them to read and get a richer language.” Teacher 7, Group A
	The Canons of Rhetoric	“Sometimes, I try to examine the novel using the form of an oral presentation. That way, I can kill two birds with one stone and teach the Canons of Rhetoric as well” Teacher 6, Group A
Literary Devices	Plot and Theme	“I always start with plot and theme. It is a good setup for a discussion.” Teacher 1, Group B
	Characters and Setting	“We start reading a text, and after a few pages I ask them what they can say about the text, in relation to the characters, the setting, and the tone” Teacher 1, Group B
Other School Subjects	Thematic Work	“Swedish and fiction are profitable when working thematically across school subjects.” Teacher 2, Group B
	Contextualization	“I once taught Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Swedish class. It gave [the students] an understanding of the historical period of the novel, and was a good match with what they did in history.” Teacher 4, Group A

4.5 Participants

The recruitment was conducted through emails sent to school principals. The recipients were asked to forward the email invitation to teachers who met the two criteria: a) teachers of Swedish who b) had a special interest in fiction and the teaching of it. The Swedish subject comprises both the study of language and literature. Thus, the first criterion ensured that the participants had professional knowledge about

fiction, as well as experience teaching it. The second one was set with regard to teacher motivation being a key determinant of student motivation and teaching effectiveness (Han & Yin, 2016), aiming to select teachers who have given their teaching of literature some extra consideration.

The 12 participants formed two groups, Group A which we met in person, and Group B whose discussion was conducted online. The participants were represented by seven female and five male Swedish teachers in upper secondary education, age ranging from 28 to 61. Their teaching background varied; the individual with the longest experience had taught for 17 years, while the participant who was the newest to the profession had been in-service for only two years. The Swedish education system offers three-year non-compulsory upper secondary education with 18 national programs, of which six are preparatory for higher education and twelve are vocational (Swedish Institute, 2019). Among the participants, there was a mix of teachers, representing both vocational programs and those who taught in programs preparatory for higher education. For the sake of anonymity, further information about the participants will not be disclosed.

4.6 Ethical aspects

The current study was conducted in accordance to Swedish law, as well as guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (Stafström, 2017). The participants gave their consent, prior to which they were informed orally about the purpose of study, the procedures, confidentiality, and the voluntariness of their participation, including their right to withdraw from the study at any point for any reason without any negative consequences.

To ensure that neither the participants nor the schools at which they work are identifiable, all collected data was encoded. The data was kept de-identified throughout the analysis, so as to minimize bias, and will be decoded only if further investigation is prompted by it and/or the findings. The key for decoding is stored on a flash drive and kept separate from the data itself. In reporting the findings, the participants' names will be removed.

In addition, even though both the participants and the schools were unknown to us, the research setting as such was familiar, which implies a risk factor for bias. To minimize the effects of this, we made sure not to participate in the focus group discussions. Moreover, questions that emerged during the discussions were entered to the conversation regardless of our own previous knowledge and experience of the matter.

Furthermore, the use of focus groups involves the risk of participants influencing each other exceedingly. Another risk is that one or a few participants control the conversation by dominating the group. Neither of these risks were observed during data collection but should nevertheless be taken into consideration.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following part of this paper advances to describe and discuss the results from the study, indicating how L1 teachers in Swedish upper secondary education view the process of literary education. The focus is on the way in which teachers view their teaching rather than on how we would describe it from a researcher's point of view. Thus, it should be noted that what we describe in the following is what the participants say that they do. Even though it may be assumed that there is a connection—even a close one—this distinction needs to be acknowledged.

How is the overall process described, and what learning activities—before, during, and after reading—do teachers employ in order to supplement the very activity of reading? The findings are presented according to the themes that emerged from the coding of the notes.

5.1 Monitoring

The first and most evident theme was teachers' monitoring of students. The general trend among the participants in this respect was the conviction that monitoring is essential in the literary classroom, and it appeared to be central to the teachers in their didactic decisions. The participating teachers' main focus was on what their students read. One of the teachers said that she always makes sure to select the reading material for her students. The main reason given to this was the ability to monitor the students and their reading. This reflects the skepticism in literature didactics about the ability of texts selected by students (Bertschi-Kaufmann & Graber, 2017), despite the possibility of students' resistance to reading caused by having to read texts that they would not have chosen themselves (Bintz, 1993). One may suggest that such resistance could interfere with students' reading development. Schrijvers et al. (2016) even go so far as to call it counterproductive.

Additionally, the emphasis on monitoring students and the way in which the monitoring was implemented, implies that the participants preferred teacher-centered learning. According to previous research findings (e.g. Schrijvers et al., 2016), this is counterproductive to the teachers' efforts to increase the reading frequency among students. There is support for the idea that differentiated instructions, that is to say student-centered teaching, leads to students reading more (Beliaeva, 2009). Beliaeva's findings are supported by Locke and Cleary (2011), who, in highlighting the importance of student-centered teaching of literature, point out the significance of the student's cultural background and how it influences the way a text is perceived. Likewise, Schrijvers et al. (2016) present results that show how autonomous students report more learning experiences.

Beliaeva's (2009) and Locke and Cleary's (2011) respective studies can be compared to Beach's (2005) focus on the intersection of texts, students' contexts, and the teacher, as mediated by discourses and cultural models. According to Beach's study, students' classroom practices need to be viewed relative to their practices in

other contexts, for us to truly understand how they learn and change in literature classes. Therefore, we suggest that the affordances of a teacher-centered approach be altered supplemented with a student-centered one, to optimize learning outcomes.

Another reason mentioned by the participants in the current study for prescribing reading material was the lack of time. "I only work with excerpts and short stories; entire novels take too long to get through" Teacher 1 in Group A said, echoing the same concern and solution presented in Casteleyn and Vandervieren's (2018) study on factors determining young adults' appreciation of reading poetry. The brief discussion following this statement showed an overall consensus regarding the time aspect and its effect on the choice of texts. This way of working may be productive for understanding fragments, but we maintain that it does not provide the students with the same Reading Experience that reading a complete text does. Furthermore, working with excerpts, teachers need to be aware of the purpose of choosing a certain text. This purpose, due to the fragmentation, replaces the encounter between the text as a whole, the author, and the reader (Öhman, 2015b), and thus needs to be made clear to be justified in the literary classroom.

Teacher 2 in Group A, however, said that he would rather leave it to the students themselves, as long as they are being challenged by what they read. "I just want them to read and read and read, so hopefully, something in all that reading will capture their interest. Once they have come that far, I can begin to introduce other aspects of fiction than the ones related to leisure reading." This mode of procedure appeared to be unusual among the other focus group participants, and it—we assert—could raise a problem with post-reading discussions. Provided that these discussions are to be kept on a work specific level, the teacher needs to have read the same literary text as the students. If a class of twenty to thirty students choose freely what novel, for instance, to read, the teacher would be required to have read twenty to thirty novels, or the following discussions could be no more than general. In the light of this, monitoring could be argued to be a strategy to keep a reasonable workload.

In any case, the teachers' standpoints concerning the matter appears to vary, even though the majority of the participants favored a teacher-centered approach. But regardless of with which approach teachers side, the recurrently prominent position of the selection of reading material suggests that it plays a central part in teachers' didactic decisions.

Another aspect that varied between different teachers was when and where the students read. While some teachers indicated that most of the reading takes place after school hours at home, others declared that students have gone from reading at home to exclusively reading during class time. This change was on several occasions explained by the teachers as a way for them to monitor the students and their reading. "They only read in the classroom these days. It is the only way to ensure that they are reading at all" Teacher 5 in Group A said, and was met by nods of recognition. The same teacher later said: "If they read at home, I would not know if they

cheated". This sentiment was mirrored by Teacher 3 in Group A: "If I let them read by themselves at home, I know that I will have to extend the deadline for finishing the book." The teachers' attempt to monitor their students was regardless of the character of the education; both teachers in vocational programs and those in programs preparatory for higher education occasionally used the word 'police' to describe their professional role. As Teacher 7 in Group A phrased it: "I prefer the students to read during class time. I want to be able to control their reading. You have to be the police to make it work." In the discussion following this statement, the general response in the focus group was that the participants would rather not take a monitoring position, but that it was a strategy to ensure that the students made progress.

It is probable that monitoring is the reason to why teachers practice the method of forming new student groups to let each student give individual presentations of what they have read and discussed in their former reading groups. None of the participants linked this particular procedure to monitoring when discussing it. Nevertheless, the way it requires students to have complied with the assigned reading is in line with the intentions of monitoring. Moreover, it is likely that what teachers try to control play an important role in their teaching. Thus, the results suggest that the participants find time management, students' following directions, and the selection of work material important to their teaching of literature.

Noticeably, the participants did not mention teaching objectives or approaches in relation to their instruction, which conveys a deviation from the conclusions drawn by Janssen and Rijlaarsdam (1996), Yimwilai (2015), and Liang (2011) regarding the implications these two aspects have on the learning outcomes. Yet, we would like to argue that the absence of explicit objectives and approaches does not equal the non-existence of the same. Both teachers and students, Molloy (2003) maintains, have conceptions about why fiction is read in school. Thus, it may be assumed that the teaching of literature is based on well-reasoned didactic decisions, and that the implicitness of these decisions is the reason why teaching purposes and strategies were not mentioned during the focus group interviews.

5.2 Print material

Yet another issue that was raised while the participants discussed the process of their teaching fiction was regarding the medium through which it is mediated. Unlike the previous theme, which disclosed different standpoints, there was strong consensus within and between the focus groups about this. There was a strong general inclination to favoring print, which the participants all believed involve more learning affordances than listening to an audiobook. "I prefer real books rather than audio books. It is better for the language learning" Teacher 3 in Group A said, and was supported by a number of colleagues, who all favored print and argued that the options available through traditional print, such as to annotate and to mark up, had no equivalent in an e-book. Consequently, when students do use audiobooks, they are

encouraged to have access to the printed book as well, in order to listen and read simultaneously. According to the participants, this distinction between reading and listening is made not only by teachers, but also by the students, to whom the different media are not merely different ways of consuming the same text, but moreover, intellectual status markers that define the level of academic achievement. The preference for print is aligned with the results in Nordberg's (2017) doctoral dissertation in which he examines young people's reading of fiction in the Digital Age.

This distinction between traditional print and audiobooks could further be discussed in relation to how the teachers' termed print material "real books". The students' reluctance regarding audiobooks is made especially clear when individuals with neuropsychiatric disorders or those who for other reasons would be helped by an audiobook disregard the option of listening to a text in favor of reading it, despite the additional work this entails. As Teacher 2 in Group B phrased it: "The students who need the support of an audiobook are usually the ones who choose not to use it." The sentiment of this particular statement appears to support the assumption that our collective and individual view on print versus audiobooks could be a key to counteract the Matthew Effect in literary education. Two of the participants mentioned that in an attempt to reduce the stigmatization of having to employ additional aids to manage a literary text, audiobooks had been offered to all students regardless of individual needs.

In addition to students' preference for reading rather than listening to fiction, they favor print over e-books, a position that Teacher 1 in Group B explained with: "I think the Reading Experience is more profound when you read a novel in print." In this respect, it did not seem to matter to the participants whether the digital text was represented in the form of an e-book, a pdf file, or a website. The preference for print is in line with previous studies, showing that students' primary learning strategy is to make print copies of online material (Annand, 2008). This preference is especially noticeable among avid readers (Tveit & Mangen, 2014), and furthermore, it is more frequent among female students (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012). However, it could be discussed whether this liking of print material depends on habits or if it has to do with factual differences. One indication to habit being the reason is how younger readers—who have been exposed to the digital format to a greater extent than older readers—seem to prefer e-books to print-based resources (Chang & Ley, 2006; Temple, Kemp, & Benson, 2006). In addition, with modern screens and software that have had decades to be refined, recent research has shown that neither reading speed nor comprehension is hindered by the use of digital media (Sackstein, Spark, & Jenkins, 2015). These findings are, however, not unchallenged. McCracken (2013), expanding Genette's epitext/peritext model, argues that electronic devices, with their arrangement of words and images on the screen affects the decoding of the text. Properties such as font-size, brightness of the screen, and text orientation affect the speed of reading, as does features such as a built-in dictionary that makes it possible to look up words quickly. And regarding reading comprehension, results have shown that it declined when students scrolled

as they read, instead of focusing on stationary chunks of text (Dyson & Haselgrove, 2000). This could be linked to the perceived distraction when reading onscreen, and our habit of using digital devices for quick action (Baron, 2017), which would seem to explain the preference for print for reading longer texts among participants of the current study and their students. Their idea of the effect that the medium has on the Reading Experience was not limited to profundity, but in a discussion about how the perception of a text changes depending on how it is mediated, Teacher 5 in Group A commented on authenticity: “The Reading Experience that you get from an e-book does not seem as genuine compared to a real book.”

The reference to printed books as “real” books was made on several occasions during the focus group discussions. A reasonable question is whether this view on e-books affects the students’ views. The shortcoming of e-books, the teachers continued to argue, is that it is difficult for the reader to get a spatial sense, which impairs their ability to navigate in the text. Teacher 2 in Group B summed it up with: “Unlike with a real book, you do not know where you are. How much have you read? Is the book soon finished?” This difficulty to navigate was further underlined by Teacher 7 in Group A who promoted printed books simply because “things feel less fragmented”, an aspect that Öhman (2015b) points out as impediment to contextualization of the text. The discussion following this statement mentioned updated features on both electronic devices and its software, allowing the user to follow their progress in a text through different measures of parts and the whole. However, despite improvements of this nature, the participants in Group A agreed that it is not comparable to the immediate overview that a printed book offers. Thus, the medium of the text was discussed as an essential factor to the Reading Experience. This could be discussed in relation to Janssen and Braaksma’s (2018) study, in which verbal and written responses to a literary text were compared, showing that the mode of response may influence the way in which students respond to a story.

5.3 Instrumentality

The view on reading as being superior to listening contradicts Gough and Tunmer (1986), Casbergue and Harris (1996), and Wolfson (2008)—among others—who propose the benefits of audiobooks for students to develop their language. The authors’ concern for language development as an aspect of literary education aligns with the overall trend among the participants of the current study. This concern could be interpreted to indicate an instrumental approach to fiction, where fiction merely acts as a means to achieve something beyond itself. “I try to choose novels that contain language that challenges my students’ vocabulary” Teacher 1 in Group A said. Teacher 7 in Group A said: “If I let them read the same things they would at home, then what would be the point of school? I want them to read and get a richer language.” The former was nuanced by one participant, who argued that the teacher’s role is to enable and encourage reading, with which he meant any kind of reading. Throughout the focus group interviews, it was evident that the participants made a

distinction for reading depending on whether they talked about fiction or non-fiction. They did not discuss further the differences in teaching approach or learning activities, but the awareness of different text genres and the need to introduce the students to a variety of them was consistent.

The participants' focus on language development through literary education reiterates tendencies and patterns found in a number of studies (e.g. Gilete, 2011; Mustakim, Mustapha, & Lebar, 2014; Persson, 2007; Poon, 2010; Rashid, Vethamani, & Rahman, 2010; Sidhu, Fook, & Kaur, 2010), and it suggests that there is a lack of valid reasons among teachers for reading fiction in an educational setting (Bruns, 2011). Furthermore, the teachers' focus could be a result of the instrumental view on fiction that has been communicated through Swedish curricula, in which it has rarely been treated as a subject in its own right (Öhman, 2015a).

The tendency towards instrumentality was similarly present when the participants discussed reading logs as a learning activity. Yimwilai (2015) proposes that the integrated approach is a likely reason why teachers ask their students to write logs and journals. However, none of the participants made that connection during the focus group discussions, and it is thus difficult to know whether to regard the practice as a teaching strategy or the result of pragmatism. Furthermore, reading logs could be a way to contextualize the very act of reading. However, we argue, that is not to be mistaken for contextualizing fiction itself. Therefore, this conduct may be viewed as simply using fiction as a springboard to teach literacy and other content external to the literary work. This suggests that attention be paid to instrumentality in literary education. If it is to have a preponderant position, both in practice and as stipulated in the curriculum, we need to understand the correlation between that view and learning outcomes.

5.4 Literary devices

When the focus group discussions turned to learning activities in connection with teaching and reading fiction, the general tendency among the participants was their immediate focus on plot, characters, themes, and other literary devices—what literature didactics commonly emphasize as key elements (Bertschi-Kaufmann & Graber, 2017). “We start reading a text, and after a few pages I ask them what they can say about the text, in relation to the characters, the setting, and the tone” Teacher 1 in Group B said. Judging from the approving nods and comments from the other participants, these elements are frequent in the literary classroom.

The focus on content could possibly push other aspects of reading aside, restricting the reading of fiction to reading proficiency and comprehension (Johansson, 2014), which, Magnusson (2015) argues, does not suffice to justify the unique position of fiction in the school setting.

This knowledge-oriented style of instruction remains common. Students' experiences were not mentioned at any point during the discussions. Yet, research has shown the benefits with experiential-oriented teaching, and, Schrijvers et al. (2016)

argue, this discrepancy is partly due to the convenience of text analysis for testing and evaluation. Thus, we conclude that this formalistic focus in literary instruction is useful in, for instance, a PISA context. However, the question is whether it is helpful in improving the declining PISA scores, or if an experiential-oriented style, which results in more reported learning experiences (Schrijvers et al., 2016) would be preferred.

The knowledge-oriented style with literary devices as a baseline was so natural among the participants, that a few of them did not, at first, recognize their working with them as actual learning activities. The fact that not one single participant in the study mentioned the process of the students learning how to approach literary devices, but instead went on to discuss how the literary devices were put to use in classroom discussions, further suggests that the actual teaching of them is assumed. This taken-for-granted mindset towards literary devices as learning activities in literary education is indicated by Blau (2003), who criticizes this formalistic approach for not engaging the reader in a way that ought to make literary texts different to read than other text types.

On the other hand, characters are the keys to fictional worlds, they invite readers to the narrated events, and they are crucial to literary reception because they make identification possible for the reader (Bertschi-Kaufmann & Graber, 2017). Thus, focusing on characters and other literary devices could prove to be the key to the Reading Experience rather than being the formalistic approach that Blau (2003) questions. Therefore, we argue, learning outcomes and students' mode of reading depend on how literary devices are taught and how they are utilized in the literary classroom to discuss and analyze fiction. In this respect, the participants gave no indication to how close or far from formalism and the Reading Experience respectively they situated their focus on literary devices.

5.5 Other school subjects in focus

The final theme that was outlined during the discussion about learning activities showed a general agreement among the participants that fiction is suitable and often used for teaching literacy in integrated forms. Activities include reading, writing, listening, and speaking operations. For instance, they let students engage in metatextual writing activities—that is, according to Genette's (1997) definition, writing texts as commentaries to other texts without necessarily quoting them. Formats that the participants mentioned were logs and journals based on what the students had read, which could then be combined with oral exercises and presentations. "Sometimes, I try to examine the novel using the form of an oral presentation. That way, I can kill two birds with one stone and teach the Five Canons of Rhetoric as well" Teacher 6 in Group A said, echoing Yimwilai's (2015) form of educational integration. Different elements of the curricular content were mentioned by the participants and connected to fiction reading, of which writing—especially writing in different text genres—was the most common together with the aforementioned Canons of Rhetoric.

Another teacher, Teacher 4 in Group A, briefly mentioned how fiction was sometimes used to accompany and illustrate different focus areas in other school subjects. From his own experience, he had taught *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in Swedish class to highlight the historical period of the novel, so as to give the students a deeper understanding of the cultural context to what they were studying with their history teacher at the time. This, we argue, does not have to be discussed in terms of reducing the literary content to something peripheral to provide background, but conversely, the cross-subject integration could be viewed as history providing context to the novel.

6. FURTHER RESEARCH

It is essential to reflect on the idea found among students—that reading fiction is more prestigious than listening to it—in the light of the notion among the teachers. Does favoring one way of probing a text before another benefit learning outcomes? And, as the teachers believed, does the medium through which fiction is presented have any bearing on the Reading Experience?

This question regarding affordances of reading and listening to texts respectively may pose as an object for further studies and is possibly best answered in connection with other aspects of the Reading Experience and how teachers take these into consideration when teaching fiction—not least as a contrast to the instrumental outlook and the formalistic nature of the learning activities. On the whole, research of the literary classroom has often focused on analytical skills in terms of interpreting literary texts (Schrijvers et al., 2016). The domain of teaching the Reading Experience is under-researched and need to be studied further.

Another question, based on our findings, that needs to be asked is what changes the teachers have noticed in regard to teaching fiction, other than where and when reading is performed. In order to anticipate how best to adapt to future challenges in teaching fiction, it is imperative to understand the past development. How, for instance, have the technological improvements during the past decade contributed to changing the way fiction is taught? Can any general changes among students be identified?

A third area for further studies that could render useful knowledge is the monitoring of students. What is the reason behind this practice, and how can this more authoritative style best be integrated with student-centered teaching, which studies have shown plays a substantial part in learning outcomes (Mukhametshina & Akhmatova, 2015; Schrijvers et al., 2016)?

The final question raised by the results, that could not be answered in the current study concerns objectives and teachers' corresponding approaches to literary education. Since the latter is of great importance to learning outcomes, it is crucial to find out whether the absence of approach in the discussion is limited to the small number of participants in this study, or if the neglect of this may be found on a broader scale. It would be valuable to ask teachers directly about their teaching

approaches, to better understand if the non-mentioning of approaches is a sign of implicitness or if there is a true lack of teaching approaches. In any case, it would be helpful to understand the objectives and approaches to teaching fiction in a Swedish context, and how they may be related to the curriculum.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the current study comprise a sample that reflects aspects of teaching fiction in a Swedish upper secondary educational context, despite its limitation in sample size. The topics and questions raised may be viewed in relation to a Swedish research tradition in the teaching and learning of literature. For instance, the results reiterate findings on the preference for print among young readers (Nordberg, 2017). Furthermore, the participants reverberated the need for a whole, lest the reading become fragmented, impeding contextualization of the text (Öhman, 2015b).

The participants described—both explicitly and implicitly—their teaching of literature largely in terms of monitoring. With few exceptions, they appreciated the possibility to decide what, where, and when the students should read, and some even underlined the necessity of this teacher-centered procedure. This is inconsistent with results from studies (e.g. Beliaeva, 2009; Mukhametshina & Akhmatova, 2015; Schrijvers et al., 2016) showing the benefits from student-centered teaching. Thus, a higher degree of student-centeredness in literary education may be a way to improve learning outcomes.

Reading fiction is considered better than listening to it, with regard to students' language development. Teaching directions are given accordingly, and this hierarchic view seems to be absorbed by the students to some degree, with the most severe example possibly being when students with neuropsychiatric disorders or who for other reasons would be helped by an audiobook disregard the option of listening to a text, even though getting through a printed book involves excess work to them. This suggests that a less hierarchical view of modality could make literary texts more accessible to students.

The concern about language development suggests an instrumental view on teaching and reading fiction, which is aligned with Johansson's (2014) notion that there is a correlation between the sole focus on reading comprehension and proficiency on one hand, and instrumentality on the other. This is supported by teachers' use of fiction as material for teaching literacy. In one case, this instrumentality even included reducing the literary text to setting the scene and the context for other school subjects. The only non-instrumental learning activities that the participating teachers discussed were exclusively focused on literary devices. In other words, literary fiction seldom exists in its own right, and the Reading Experience—which in De-Malach and Poyas's (2018) study on pre-service literature teachers' change in focus, was listed as the most dominant criteria for a text's appropriateness for teaching—appears to play a secondary role.

Finally, worth noting is how the results from the study clearly deviated from some of the findings in previous research in this area that imply that teaching objectives, teaching approach (e.g. Liang, 2011; Schrijvers et al., 2016; Yimwilai, 2015), and teaching strategy (Tengberg & Olin-Scheller, 2013) are key elements in literary education and students' learning. Neither of these were mentioned by the participants, which is not to say that they are non-existing. Both language development, contextualization of content, and the use of literary devices to analyze fiction were represented in the focus group interviews. This suggests a number of possible approaches applied by the participants: The Language-Based Approach and the Stylistic Approach to focus on language development, the Cultural Model for contextualization, and the Critical Literary Approach to highlight literary devices. These presumptive teaching approaches along with the emphasis on monitoring and print suggest that literary education, among the participants, is still conducted in a traditional manner, despite accessibility to the expanding digital landscape of teaching.

Returning to the aspect of declining results in reading comprehension assessments such as PISA, and the possible connection to the negative trend in reading habits, we suggest the following. 1) *A more student-centered approach could be beneficial to improving reading habits.* Less monitoring would allow more differentiated classroom instruction, and a higher level of student's agency. 2) *A more pragmatic view on mediality could increase accessibility to fiction.* If different modes of mediation were given the equal status, a more flexible and need-based approach would be enabled. 3) *Literary devices, with a clearer connection to the Reading Experience, can serve as means to make literary education more enjoyable.* If used to facilitate identification and as a way for students to relate to the narrated world and events, the use of literary devices may intensify the enjoyability of fiction, and thus give students a reason to read. In accordance with these three suggestions, we conclude that an improvement in students' reading habits is possible with the prerequisites described by the participants. Neither of the presented suggestions are— in a Swedish educational context, with easy access to digital material—dependent on resources, but with current classroom practices the potential to change rather lies in the literary educational approach.

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