

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE WORKING WITH LITERATURE IN NORDIC SECONDARY EDUCATION

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In 2013, four of our five guest editors for this special issue were early career PhD researchers meeting in Paris at the 9th conference of the International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education (IAIMTE). Affiliated at four different universities in four different Nordic countries, we shared the experience that the L1 literature education research community consisted of a rather small number of researchers at each of our institutions. Meeting in the international (although rather European) setting of the conference for IAIMTE (now the International Association for Research in L1 Education, ARLE) highlighted the sense of regional belonging to the Nordic countries. From these experiences, the idea of founding a research network within the Scandinavian speaking region was born a couple of months later. In November 2014, we organized the first seminar in Stavanger, Norway and, as a result, established the Nordic Research Network on Literature Education.

Neither the experience of limited, local research communities, nor the initiative to look across neighbouring borders to cooperate, compare and seek inspiration, represented something new in the international L1 community. Rather, this seems to be a recurring pattern in the L1 research field. Internationally, similar experiences and initiatives established networks and associations like the International Mother Tongue Education Network (IMEN) and IAIMTE/ARLE, and even motivated the foundation of this journal (Araujo et al., 2021). Within the Nordic region, parallel initiatives motivated the foundation of networks like Nordfag.net (Elf & Kaspersen, 2012)—a Nordic L1 research network springing out from IMEN in 2007—and the Nordic Network for Mother Tongue Education Research (NNMF, see e.g. Ongstad,

2012) founded in 2008. NNMF's biennial conferences still provide an important rendez-vous of Nordic L1 researchers.

To the best of our knowledge, the Nordic Research Network on Literature Education is the first Nordic research network focusing exclusively on *L1 literature education*. Since 2014, the steering group has organized research seminars, conference symposia and papers, and co-published a comparative study on cultural models of literature education in formal Nordic L1 curricula (Gourvennec et al., 2020). Nordic research studies within the field of L1 literature education are often published in the respective L1 language, although an increased use of English as research language is seen in the last decade (Holmberg et al., 2019). Publishing research in national languages is important to prevent domain loss for the small Scandinavian languages, and it allows for dialogue between the Scandinavian speaking research community in the Nordic region. However, there is a risk of this research existing “in splendid isolation” (cf. Araujo et al, 2021) from the larger international research community.

The Nordic countries consist of Denmark (and Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. A multitude of different languages prevail in the region, however; in all countries the Scandinavian languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish form either the official language (Denmark, Norway and Sweden), one of two official languages (Finland) or the first (the Faroe Islands and Greenland) or second (Iceland) mandatory foreign language taught in school. This leads to possibilities for collaboration across the region. In addition, the educational systems are similar; typically, the first ten years of school are obligatory (for students aged 6–15) whereafter most students continue to general upper secondary (for 2–4 years) or vocational school (for 1–5 years). In this special issue, we focus on Nordic secondary education, that is, lower secondary school—formed by the last years of compulsory schooling (students aged 13–15)—and upper secondary school (the majority of students aged 16–20).

An overall characteristic of the Nordic L1 school subjects is their triadic construction and integration of language, literature and literacy instruction in the same subject throughout primary and secondary school. However, there are national differences in how the weighting of these content areas may look. Additionally, the L1 subject may vary profoundly within the same country at different stages of schooling such as lower and upper secondary (e.g. Krogh & Piekut, 2015). Another common characteristic is a tradition for Nordic teachers' relatively extended autonomy. For example, teachers are not obliged to follow certain instructional methods or to read prescribed works of prose, poetry or drama as part of the content area literature, although unofficial or official reading lists exist (e.g. Weinreich, 2006). Nordic L1 literature education is formed by cultural and societal changes and mirrors a recent shift, identified internationally, in what characterises L1 school subjects: from subjects related to national culture and mother tongue languages to subjects in a global world, responding differently to multicultural questions and technocultural changes (Green & Erixon, 2020). This has consequences for the notion of literature, which currently builds on an extended notion of text. This implies a co-existence not only

of different written fictional genres and formats, but also digital and other multi-modal formats and therefore a broadened text lexicon in L1 school subjects with implications for L1 literature instruction.

Due to their similarities, the Nordic countries have influenced each other within L1 in general, and in literature education in particular. Accordingly, cross-national analyses of different aspects of L1 in the Nordic countries have been conducted, for example, in relation to the notion of multimodality (Elf et al., 2018) and also—to some extent—in relation to the framing of writing development (Jefferey et al., 2019). In 2015, Ellen Krogh and Sylvi Penne brought the Scandinavian L1 subjects to the forefront and edited a special issue, in this journal, where different contributions investigated contemporary challenges and conflicts in Scandinavian L1 education. Furthermore, the L1 research field was object of comparison in a recent review of PhD dissertations within Nordic L1 research in 2000–2017 (Holmberg et al., 2019).

Studies have also shown an interest in cross-national analysis in relation to literature education within L1. For example, in a previous study on which cultural models of literature and literature education are reflected in Nordic L1 curricula, we investigated national curricula for lower secondary education from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Gourvenec et al., 2020). Similarly, Sjöstedt (2013) conducted a comparative study of literature as reflected in the Swedish and Danish national curricula for upper-secondary school. Rødnes (2014) investigated previous literature pedagogical studies in Scandinavia. In the edited book with the title (translated) *The Nordic School—does it exist?* (Elf & Kaspersen, 2012), a number of researchers reported from the inter-Scandinavian research project *Nordfag.net*. With a specific focus on the countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, they explored L1 teachers' construction of professional identity in the light of rapid changes in the Nordic educational systems. The answer to the title was yes, the distinctively Nordic, or more precisely in this context, Scandinavian, school does exist. A shared characteristic identified was a student-centered pedagogy, based on ideas originating from the social democratic foundations of the Nordic welfare systems. Moreover, an interest in students' individual development and formation, and an interest in equality and an acceptance of governmental steering, were identified as common threads (Krogh et al., 2012).

Needless to say, Nordic research on literature education displays a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches. Moreover, it illustrates different understandings of the concept of literature, its purposes and values in L1 education, both on national and cross-national levels. With this special issue, our aim is to make Nordic research on L1 literature education—with its common features and diversity—visible and accessible for an international research community.

THE PRESENT SPECIAL ISSUE

The special issue gathers contributions on literature education, with different theoretical and methodological approaches, which either describe original research or

which build on research previously published in one of the Nordic languages. Importantly, we wish to emphasize that this special issue is in no way an overview of Nordic research on literature education, rather it provides glimpses of recent research related to literature education in the Nordic countries. Still, these glimpses paint a picture (again, not *the* picture) of current research tendencies and inquiries in Nordic research on literature education.

This special issue presents nine studies in total, seven studies of literature instruction in lower secondary and two in upper secondary school. One of the nine articles looks beyond the Nordic countries to draw comparison between Sweden and France. Two of the articles analyse data from two or more Nordic countries. Data derive from interviews, observations (video or audio recorded), students' texts and study texts in different genres and media. Most contributions focus on students engaging with literary texts and instructional activities, whereas one investigates teachers' perspectives on literary competence (Fodstad & Husabø) and another teachers' instruction (Nissen et al.). The instructional activities investigated in the studies include writing (Kabel), reading and reacting to literary texts (Johansson), conversation (Skaftun & Sønneland, Kähkölä & Rättyä), and interaction with different media (Henkel et al., Höglund & Rørbech)—in whole class and group settings. The literary works that appear in the studies are fictional narrative texts (Henkel et al., Höglund & Rørbech, Johansson, Kabel, Skaftun & Sønneland) and/or poetry (Höglund & Rørbech, Kähkölä & Rättyä). Let us take a closer look at the individual contributions.

In the first article, *Exploring reading experiences in three media versions: Danish 8th grade students reading the story Nord*, Henkel, Mygind and Svendsen investigate lower secondary students' experiences of and reflection on the story *Nord* by Camilla Hübbe and Rasmus Meisler in three media versions: as a digital audiobook, as digital-born narrative, and as illustrated printed book. The study shows how the different media versions involve a distinct reading experience understood as a necessary interplay between cognitive and sensory activities. The analyses demonstrate how the different media influence the reading experience and based on this the authors propose a model for understanding the reading experience in a school context comprising three features: experience, comprehension and materiality.

Kabel's study, *Year 8 Students' Interpretations of Short Stories in the Danish L1 Literature Classroom: Distinct Ways of Writing and Knowing*, examines how year 8 students (aged 13–14 years) use literary terms and construct evaluative stances in interpretations of contemporary short stories. Through a functional linguistic and sociological framework, she finds the presence of three distinct and, to a certain extent, conflicting knowledge tendencies reflected and co-created in the students' written language use. The findings indicate the need for intensified discussions among teachers and researchers regarding what is important, and why, when students are required to engage in interpretive writing tasks in the L1 literature classroom.

In the article *Performative spaces: Negotiations in the literature classroom*, Höglund and Rørbech revisit empirical examples from their previous studies on

students' meaning making of literature in lower secondary education in Finland and Denmark. With the aim of exploring what performativity can offer research on literature education, the authors apply two theoretical approaches to performativity, poststructuralist and posthumanist. Using a 'thinking with theory' approach, the authors bring the processes and unfoldings of the literature classroom into focus, suggesting and elaborating on negotiation as a key concept. Based on these analyses, they discuss the contribution of a performative approach to research on literature education.

In *Experimenting with the Linguaging Approach in Teaching Poetry*, Kähkölä and Rättyä aim to develop a teaching method called the languaging approach. The article compares the differences between student discussions and teacher-led conversation and investigates whether the languaging approach and collaborative dialogue can offer new teaching approaches for literature education. The data were collected from two groups of 13-year-old students (n = 31) during their L1 lessons in Finland. The study revealed that several students who were encouraged in using the languaging approach were able to describe their thoughts to each other and build meaningful analytical discussions together.

In *Norwegian L1 Teachers' Conception of Literature Teaching and Literary Competence Throughout Lower Secondary Education*, Fodstad and Husabø discuss reflections on literature teaching among L1 teachers in a Norwegian lower secondary school. Through nine semi-structured interviews they investigate how teachers plan for and assess their students' literary development. The study builds on theoretical perspectives of L1 paradigm syntheses, models of literary competence, as well as sociological studies of professions. The analysis suggests that the main aim of literature teaching realised in practice and articulated by teachers is to foster the joy of reading. The teachers describe the development as a progress from experience-based literature teaching to more analytical and interpretative approaches. The results are discussed in the light of the impact of a school's professional community.

In the study *Cool kids' carnival: double-voiced discourse in student conversations about literature*, Skaftun and Sønneland focus on group conversations about literary texts in lower secondary education in Norway. The groups' conversations are considered as borderline cases of substantial student engagement due to the prominent features of laughter and playfulness. With the aim to explore group conversations about literary texts perceived as subject-specific problems, the authors analyse nuances of double-voiced discourses in students' conversations about literature. The study concludes that dialogic discourse analysis can make teachers and researchers more sensitive to productive aspects of playfulness in the literature classroom.

In her article *Literary socialisation through education: A comparative study of Swedish and French Upper Secondary School Students' Reception of a Narrative Text and the Paradox of Literature Education*, Johansson compares Swedish and French upper secondary school students' written comments (n=223) to the same short story, "The Banshee" by Joyce Carol Oates. Conducting a thematic analysis, she finds that the Swedish students tend to focus more on content and extratextual aspects,

whereas the French students pay more attention to literary aspects, such as style and language. She explains these national differences as a result of literary socialisation and discusses how to support students' skilful reading in the context of literature education in Sweden. The article also analyses the present Swedish curriculum and discusses the paradox of literature education. The study concludes that reading for pleasure in a school context is challenged by the strong framing provided by knowledge requirements and examinations.

In *Re-designing print-based mindsets: Reading practices in transformation in the Swedish digital literary classroom*, Asplund and Olin-Scheller explore Swedish vocational upper secondary students' reading in what they term connected classrooms, i.e. classrooms with student access to social media through mobile phones. In their study, which forms part of a larger video ethnographic study conducted in nine classes at two schools, they closely examine the activities of one group of male students enrolled in a Building and Construction Programme during a session of free voluntary reading. Based on an analysis using concepts of domination, access, diversity and design as developed by Hillary Janks, the article discusses how the printed book is given contradictory roles and how male students may engage in reading practices other than those sanctioned by the encompassing reading project and school in general.

Finally, in the comparative study *Function and Use of Literary Texts in Nordic Schools*, Nissen, Tengberg, Svanbjörnsdóttir, Gabrielsen, Blikstad-Balas and Klette investigate how literature lessons in Nordic lower secondary school are organized, to what extent different genres are read and worked upon, and for what subject-specific functions and purposes literary texts are used. The study relies on four consecutive video-recorded language arts lessons from 102 classrooms in Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The data is investigated by means of video-analysis and statistical comparison. The authors find that literary texts are favoured above other texts in L1 instruction, and that reading these texts should mainly foster students' reading comprehension.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Every contribution in this special issue looks into general instruction, i.e. the ordinary classroom. We might read this as an outgrowth from the interest in equality in the Nordic school implying that every student should have equal possibilities to grow, despite social and cultural differences. In this practice, the pertinent values to engage and involve every student in their learning process are prominent. We could say that this inclusive policy points towards ideals of progressive education to respond to the complexity of the educational context presented. At the same time, this situation nourishes the need for research on how to ensure educational quality in the literature classroom that meets all complexities in a way that ensures qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta, 2009) for every student. In different ways, the papers in this present special issue contribute to different aspects of this

situation. However, the extent to which these studies respond to this situation explicitly differs.

In some studies, the significance of students' active participation and engagement in learning processes is present at the level of research interest, such as in the investigation of the meaning-making process through negotiations between literary text, students, peers and video camera (Höglund & Rørbech), through investigations of students' readings of a narrative in different media versions (Henkel et al.), or in the study of the teacher's facilitation of students' interpretations through the languaging approach (Kähkölä & Rättyä). Further, Skaftun and Sønneland focus on borderline cases of students' engagement as the result of student-led activity (Skaftun & Sønneland). Finally, the interest of working-class boys' responses to a reading project foregrounds a collision between the expectations of reading engagement through free voluntary reading and the boys' alternative text practices (Asplund & Olin-Scheller).

In other studies, student participation is also a core issue for discussions that identify instructional purposes that negotiate experience-based and knowledge-based text interactions. Such issues are present in the discussion of teachers' reflections about the shifting aims of literature instruction throughout upper secondary school (Fodstad & Husabø); of the somewhat conflicting functions of the use of literary texts observed in Nordic lower secondary classrooms (Nissen et al.); of the discrepancy between reading for pleasure and in the requirements of curricula, evaluations and examinations (Johansson); and in the acknowledgement of various forms in which the students may communicate their literary interpretations (Kabel).

With this special issue, our aim was to make Nordic research on L1 literature education visible and accessible for an international research community. In one way, the single studies included in the issue represent a complex picture where each article is taken from different context, applying different methods and theoretical perspectives. In another way, this complex picture provides an insight to the common ideal of active student participation. This picture echoes the claim stated by Krogh and Penne that "the notion of the free and active student [...] still remains a powerful metaphor in Scandinavian educational discourse" (2015, s. 2). It is a claim worth repeating, with extension to all of the Nordic countries represented in this collection.

Even though most contributions in this special issue are authored by researchers from one country, the issue also includes examples of collaborative research across the Nordic countries. We hope that these examples and the common interests and ideals across the special issue encourage continuous research initiatives on L1 literature education in and between the Nordic countries—and beyond.

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